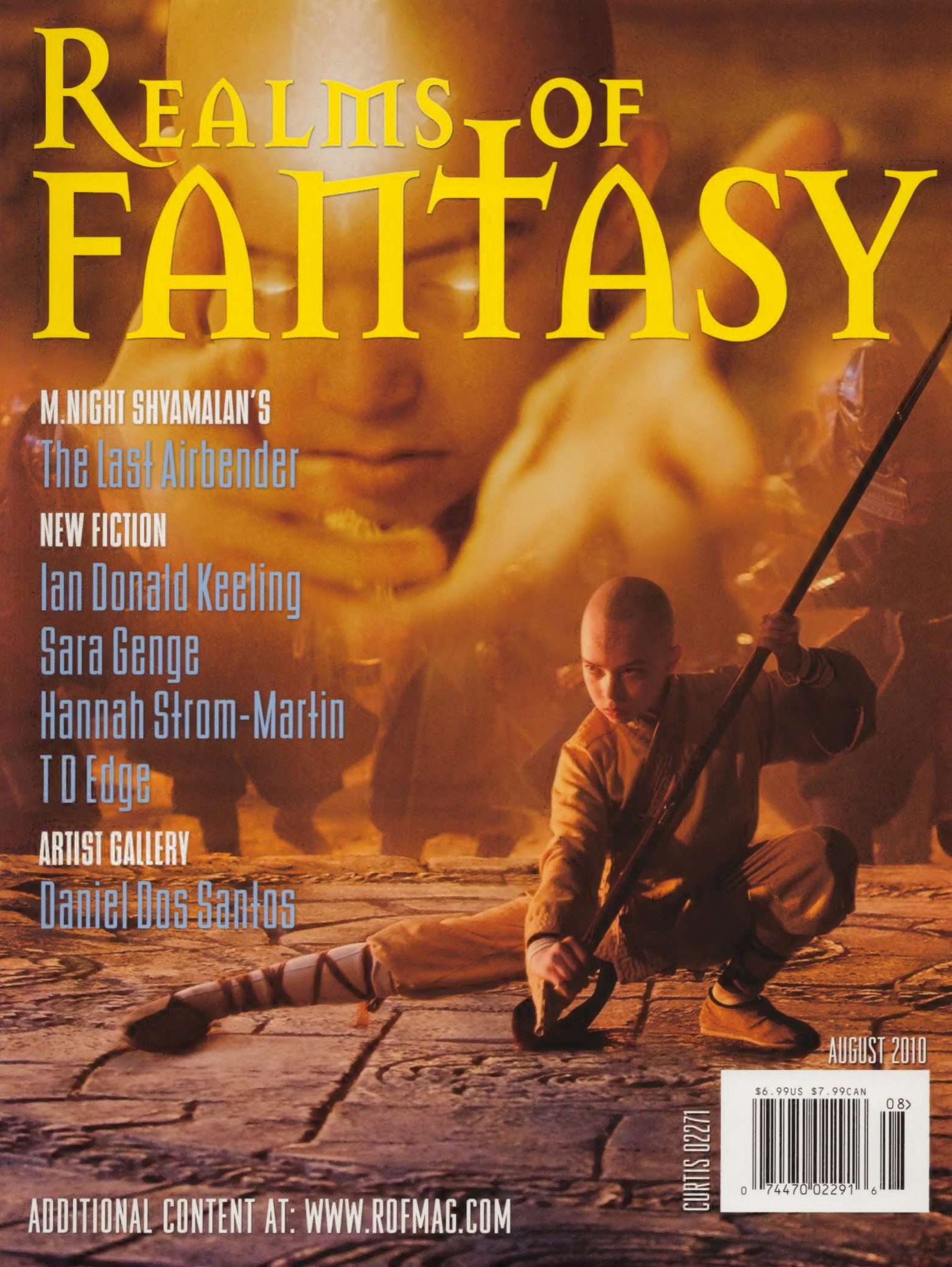
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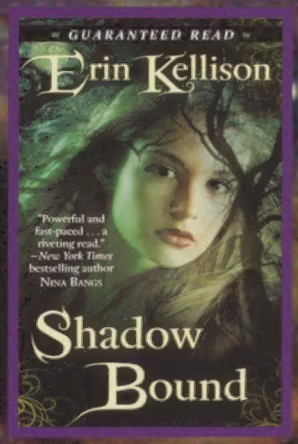
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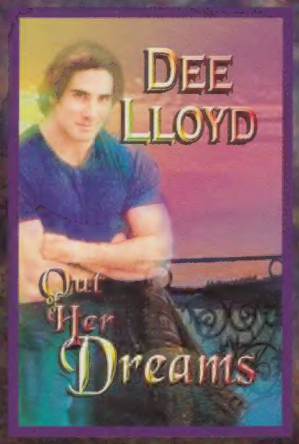

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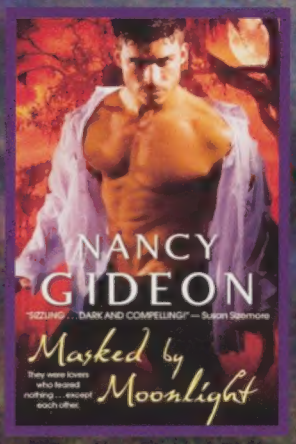
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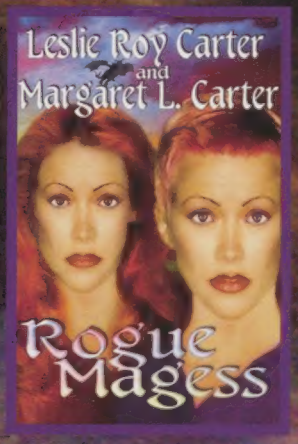

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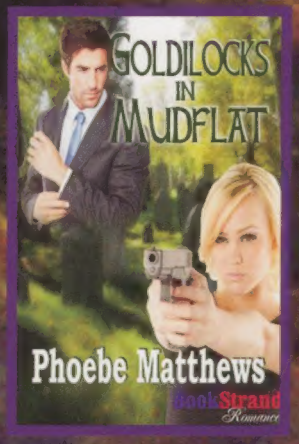

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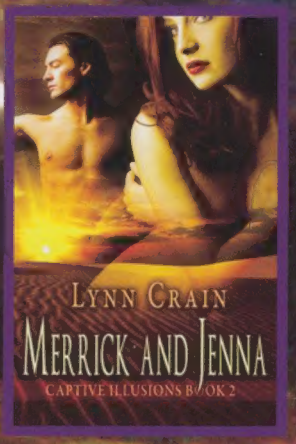

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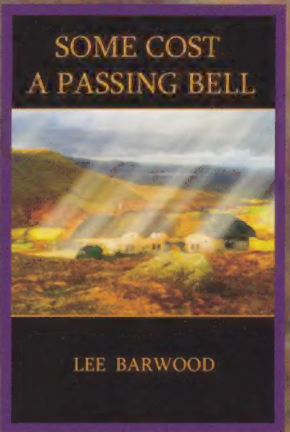

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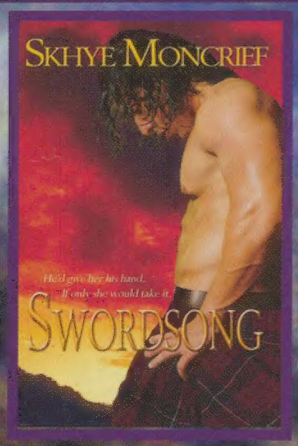

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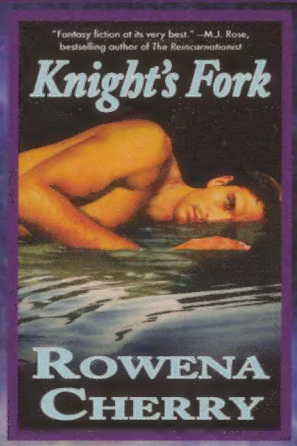

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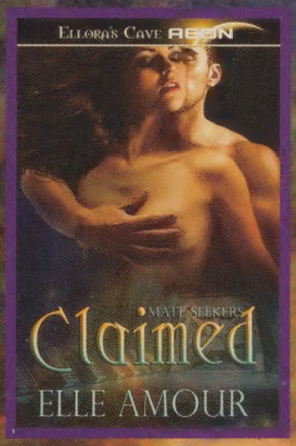

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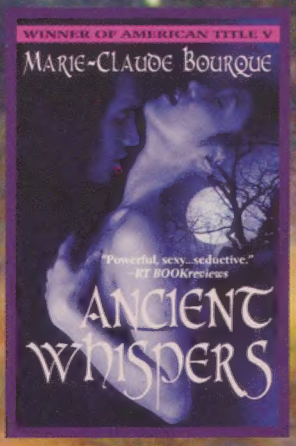

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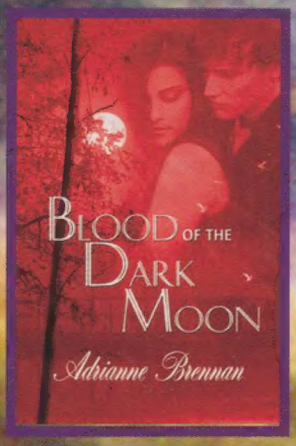

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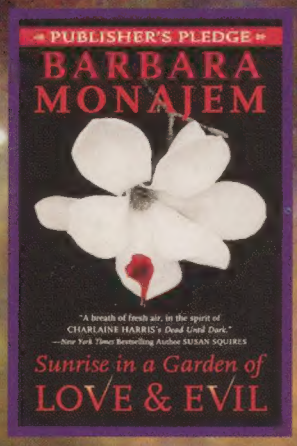
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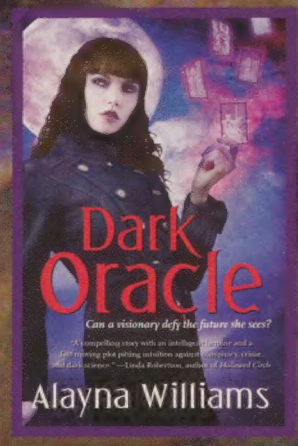

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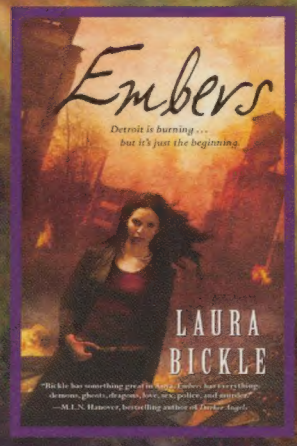

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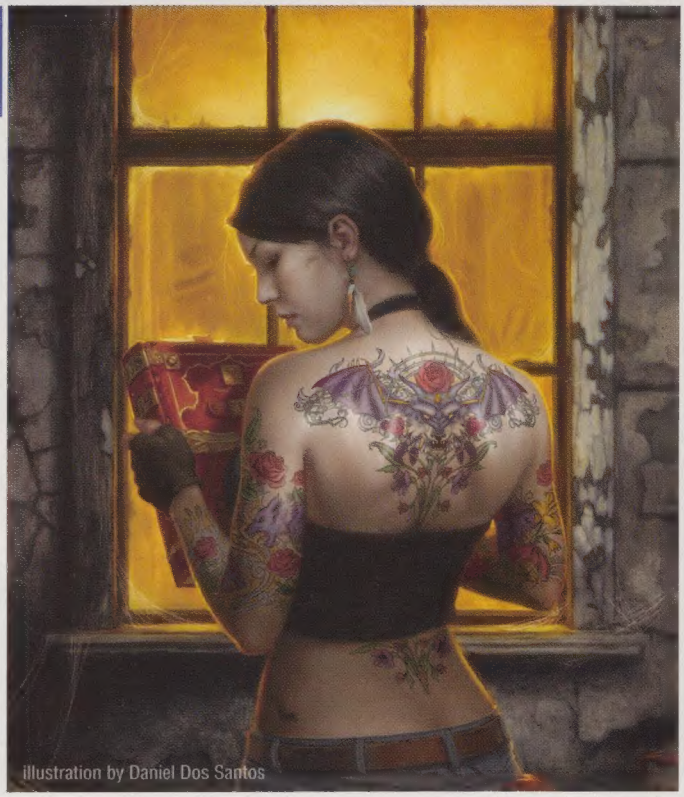
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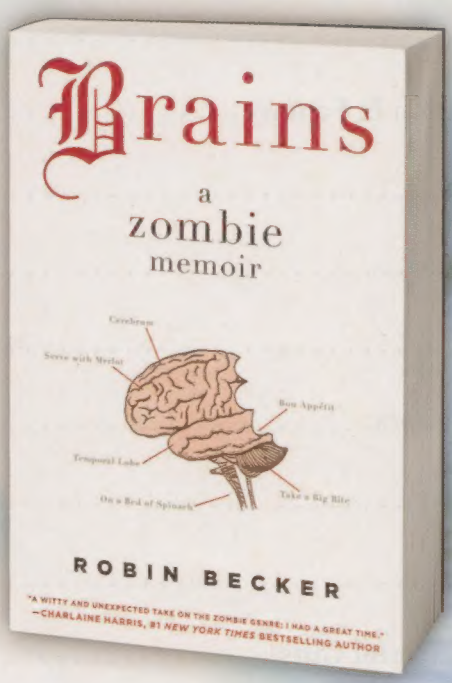
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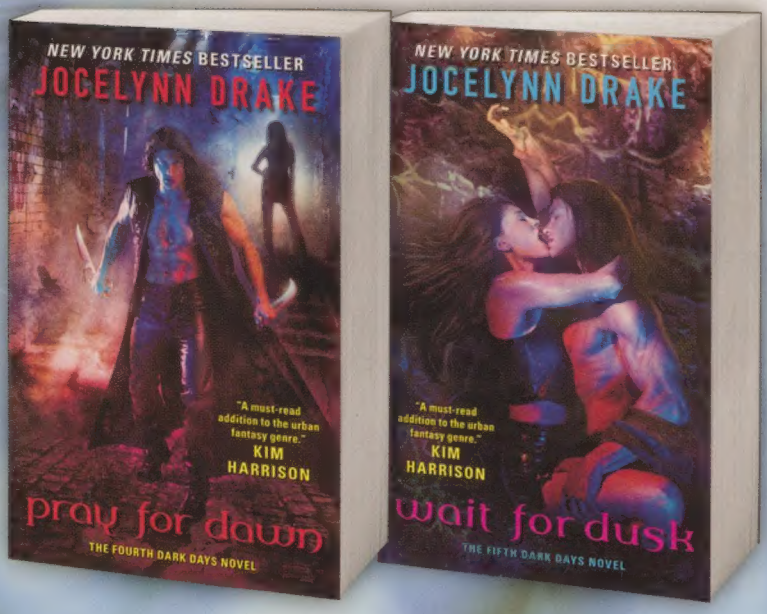
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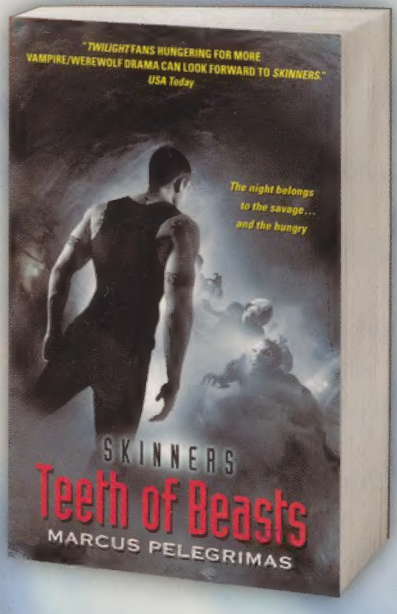
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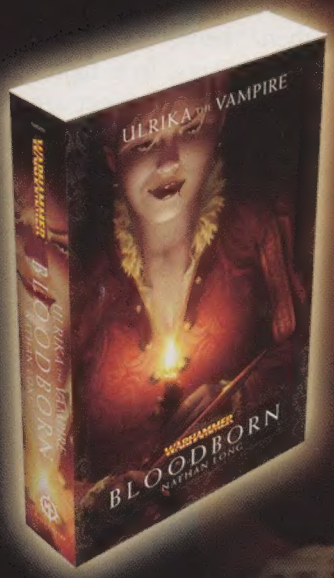

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M. Night Shyamalan Takes a Leap of Faith and Turns a TV Cartoon into an Epic Fantasy Film

by Resa Nelson

Noah Ringer plays the heroic Aang in Paramount Pictures' adventure "The Last Airbender."

If you've heard the news that M. Night Shyamalan (The Sixth Sense, The Happening) has written and directed a live-action film based on a popular Nickelodeon cartoon series, you might be scratching your head. How can the director most often compared to Alfred Hitchcock and known for twist endings tackle such a project? Maybe the bigger mystery is why he would suddenly depart from his own unique vision. A visit to George Lucas's Industrial Light & Magic (ILM) in San Francisco was the first step to unraveling this mystery.

A glimpse of scenes from The Last Airbender (scheduled for release on July 2 from Paramount Pictures and Nickelodeon Movies) at ILM reveals this movie has more in common with Shyamalan's body of work than first meets the eye. Shyamalan's movies fall into the realm of the paranormal, science fiction, and horror while typically staying grounded in our present-day world. His foray with The Last Airbender allows him to stay within the realm of fantasy while extending his reach into a mythical world. At the same time, The Last Airbender promises to showcase Shyamalan's strengths: great performances, storytelling, and characters.

However, The Last Airbender has already caught flak for "whitewashing," meaning, the casting of white actors (or actors who appear to be white) to play non-white characters, especially when those characters are heroic. It's a hot-button issue that dredges up memories of images like Al Jolsen wearing black-face makeup. Of course, there are two sides to this coin. On one hand, whitewashing can feel insulting, disrespectful, and disappointing to movie-goers. Many may label it as politically incorrect. On the other hand, anyone who has run a casting call will tell you that when you find the right actor for a role, something magical happens. Time seems to stop, and you feel as if the character comes to life right in front of your eyes. The character is no longer ink on paper; the character begins to live and breathe. It has nothing to do with race and everything to do with the individual human being reading for the part. Adding to the mix is the fact that some roles written for white people have been won by actors of color, and some roles written for men have been played by women. In other words, whitewashing isn't a one-way street. It's a difficult situation that places filmmakers between the goal of finding magic and not offending audiences. At the end of the day, most directors simply want to tell a good story.

The story is based in a fairy tale kingdom, which is split into four different worlds," says actor Dev Patel, best known for his role as the heroic Jamal in last year's Oscar winner for Best Picture, Slumdog Millionaire. "There's the Air nation, the Fire nation, the Earth nation, and the Water nation."

Within each nation, people have the ability to control and manipulate that one element, and this ability is called "bending." For example, a member of the Water nation has the ability to tap into any source of water—such as a lake, a fountain, or even a puddle—and then "bend" that water in any number of ways. In a fight, a Waterbender might whip water around as if from a hose that has escaped the hands of a firefighter, or turn water into shards of ice to create a protective wall or to use like daggers.

But there's a problem. Years ago, the Fire nation nearly succeeded in taking over the world. The Fire nation controls almost every city, and members of the Earth and Water nations have lost touch with their powers to bend their elements. Thematically, the movie seems to say that everyone is born with a purpose, and it is up to each of us discover what our purpose is.

I'm the prince of the Fire nation," Patel says about the villainous character he plays. "Through time the Air nation has been wiped out, and there's one boy who needs to be found that seems to be the last of his kind, the last Airbender. I've been banished by outraging my father, and the only way to

photo: Zade Rosenthal © 2010 Paramount Pictures Corporation. All Rights Reserved.

Dev Patel plays Prince Zuko in Paramount Pictures' adventure "The Last Airbender."

regain honor is to capture this mythical boy. I'm sent out on this mission, which my father thinks is impossible. And I have this one-track determination to capture this boy and bring him to my father's feet."

Patel used the cartoon to learn about his character. In fact, one of the first tasks for everyone involved in making The Last Airbender was to become familiar with the TV cartoon. "Most everybody tried to watch at least the first season," says Barry Williams, the Digital Matte/Environmental Supervisor. With a laugh he adds, "It's good, so that wasn't hard homework to do."

In adapting the cartoon, Shyamalan has created a world grounded in reality. For example, he chose to keep all of the elements realistic and didn't want them to seem fantasy-like in any way. While keeping the film appropriate for young people, he's likely to also reach an adult audience by adding elements of darkness.

Patel says, "In the cartoon, things have to be slightly over the top to get a few more laughs. But the cartoon has some really intelligent things to say, and I think what we've done in the film is to try to tone things down and bring a more human aspect to it and really make you feel for this Airbender's struggle."

About Shyamalan, Patel says, "He's really passionate about the script. For a director of his caliber to take on this and to flip it 180 is going to be really interesting, because you don't associate action and CGI flicks with M. Night Shyamalan. You think of more dramatic pieces. So he's going to bring that depth to the characters. But at the same time, he's young at heart. He's charismatic. He's a young guy. He's going to bring the energy to the film that will do justice to the cartoon and at the same time try to capture the characters' essence."

(Shyamalan) is going to bring the energy to the film that will do justice to the cartoon and at the same time try to capture the characters' essence.

The filmmakers worked hard to make all of the natural elements look real, especially when being used by benders. "There are so many different ways you can approach the bending," Williams says. "We pretty much explored all of them. And Night was very particular about each warrior or 'bender' having his own style, so we had to come up with those."

One challenge the filmmakers faced was the task of making fire look real on screen, especially when being used by Firebenders. Visual Effects Supervisor Pablo Helman shot footage of real fire and showed that footage to Shyamalan. To the director, the footage of real fire looked like fire created by CGI. To solve that problem, ILM developed new technology that included creating new hardware and software to make it possible to bend the elements on screen.

Patel describes the relationship between the elements and the characters. "If you think of fire as being erratic and irrational and dangerous and quite scary, you can think of some of the members of the Fire nation like that. And my character in particular is trying to be what the elders are trying to be. But he's basically a young boy trying to be a man and he's very

confused. He just wants the love of his father and will do anything for it. He's very temperamental, and you get that from the cartoon."

Other elements created different challenges for the filmmakers. "One of the troubles with air was how much should we see it?" Williams says. "Because you wouldn't really see it. So we always tried to pull dust or snow or anything from the environment just so it was visible."

The end result of air bending is subtle but effective. For example, tiny swirls of dust dance at the feet of Aang (played by Noah Ringer), the last Airbender, when he bends air to propel himself up a wall.

One of the most striking aspects of the film is the combination of martial arts with the bending of elements. The world has a very Asian look and feel, and the martial arts sometimes have that same gravity-defying sense from movies like Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. When young Aang fights, he can climb walls with ease, running up them as if he's jogging up a mountain trail. But even more impressive is the sense that martial arts and bending go hand in hand for all benders. In one scene, a Firebender reaches toward a nearby fire, draws the fire in around him, and then throws it at an opponent. All the time, he looks as if he's simply practicing martial arts poses that anyone will recognize. And yet it feels as if those poses were created for bending. After watching just a few scenes of The Last Airbender, it is startling to realize that the martial arts were created in our world, where bending doesn't exist.

Patel found his job easier thanks to his own background. "I'd been training in martial arts for a while. I got a black belt in Tae Kwon Do and was very serious about it. I still am very passionate about it, but the thing is I'm very rusty because I haven't practiced or trained in a very long while due to filming Slumdog and other things. But it certainly did help.

The great thing about this film is you really get to express yourself as an actor physically. Most of the time you're doing it via dialog, but in a film like this—people are not going to watch Oscar-winning performances. They're going to watch amazing effects. Hopefully, they're going to be captivated by the characters, but they want to watch mind-blowing fight scenes. That's why it's very interesting that these fight scenes don't necessarily have to be physical in the sense that I don't need to touch [my opponent] to hurt him; I can throw a fireball that can reach him. It's amazing, this dynamic in the film that makes it very different from other films in that they can fight from very far away and these elements come into play. You can imagine what happens if water hits fire. It's very interesting."

Think of the game Rock, Paper, Scissors. Every object can defeat an object

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Noah Ringer plays the heroic Aang in Paramount Pictures' adventure "The Last Airbender."

and be defeated by an object. For example, Scissors can defeat Paper by cutting it, but Scissors can be broken by Rock. This principle is somewhat similar in The Last Airbender, although each element can defeat and be defeated by every other element. While Fire is dangerous, it can be doused by Water, smothered by Earth, or redirected by Air.

The world itself was created to support the characters' skills in bending. "It's a big point that each of the tribes, their locations, are very much designed for their skill in bending," says Williams.

Part of the design process included sending teams to locations around the world to photograph landscapes and temples. The filmmakers then combined different landscapes with temple-inspired designs. For example, the filmmakers placed the image of an Asian temple designed for Airbenders on top of towering mesas filmed in Monument Valley in Arizona.

We have this temple that's perched on this cliff face here that only Airbenders used to be able to get to," says Christian Alzmann, Visual Effects Art Director. "But now the Fire Nation has come in and pillaged and put their steel architecture in and amongst this very naturalistic landscape. It gives you a nice juxtaposition."

Although the Fire nation has conquered most of the world, there is one city left untouched: the city of the Northern Water tribe, which represents freedom and the practice of bending. "This is the last protected bastion of benders that aren't Firebenders," Williams says. "The Firebenders have come and conquered all the other tribes. [The Northern Waterbenders] have actually held out and still practice their craft. That shows up in all the architecture, which is super elegant and super intricate in design. The water flows into the city. There are lots of pools. It's actually pretty. As opposed to, in the film you might see the Southern Water tribe. They use ice blocks to build igloos because they've forgotten how to bend.

The Firebenders are the fascists of all the benders, so you'll see a lot of sharp and pointy shapes. They're the dangerous ones in this film. [They wear] a lot of that lovely fascist red. But they're also really big into industry, so that whole thing of smoke and fire and a lot of metal."

AN M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN FILM
THE LAST AIRBENDER
PARAMOUNT PICTURES AND NICKELODEON MOVIES PRESENT
A BLINDING EDGE PICTURES/KENNEDY/MARSHALL COMPANY PRODUCTION
AN M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN FILM "THE LAST AIRBENDER"
INDUSTRIAL LIGHT & MAGIC
JAMES NEWTON HOWARD
JOSE L. RODRIGUEZ
KENNEDY SCOTT AVERSANO
MICHAEL DANTE DIMARTINO AND BRYAN KONIETZKO
SAM MERCER FRANK MARSHALL
M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN

While much of The Last Airbender draws upon locations as varied as Greenland (for the Northern Water tribe) to Burma, Cambodia, and Vietnam (for the temple designs), many of the film's locations were in or near Philadelphia where Shyamalan typically shoots his movies. Once these scenes were shot, the world's details were added. For example, after a scene was shot on a grassy hill near Philadelphia, visual effects artists added in details like glimpses of temples rising behind that hill. However, Shyamalan takes an approach of "less is more" to maintain a sense of realism.

Another dose of realism comes in the director's compassion toward the characters, especially toward the young villain Prince Zuko, who promises to be sympathetic despite his constant pursuit of the last Airbender. "Night always says that Zuko has a constant choice between being good or being evil," Patel says. "That's what his life is. He's very close to his uncle, who

is the father figure in his life. He tries to teach this boy to lighten up and take life one step at a time and just be young and enjoy himself. They're the yin and yang. My character is the total opposite. He has a scar on his face which his father did to him to show everyone that this is the shamed Prince Zuko and this boy has to live with this physical scar for the rest of his life.

You want to put him as a villain, but you feel bad for him. You empathize with Zuko, because he's really a child. Normally, there's an adult playing a villain, and he's a fully grown man with a scary-looking face, and you know there's hardly no room for change. But my character, I'm very young. You have to give in to a different perspective when you're looking at the film. He's a young boy. So he has lots of room to change and to be influenced. It's just about who he listens to in the film."

While Prince Zuko struggles, the hero Aang is surrounded by allies and enemies, including a few fantasy creatures. Animation Supervisor Tim Harrington says, "One of the things that drew me to this project is the wide variety of creatures. We've got a lemur with bat wings and a giant sky bison at sixteen feet tall with six legs and a beaver tail. We've got the spirit dragon, which is a snakelike dragon with wings. Then we have the komodo rhinos that are these big beastly creatures that the villains ride."

Appa is the enormous creature that inspired the animators to study bison, polar bears, elephants, and beavers. "I thought about him as a combination of Chewbacca and the Millennium Falcon," Harrington says. "He's this hairy sidekick, but he's also the kid's ride from location to location, so he's an important part of the film. We had to do the leap of faith and a bit of suspension of disbelief with the flying. He's an Airbender. He might do something with his paws to push through the air and something with his tail. He's motivating his own movement, but there's always going to be a little bit of a magical quality to it."

For Patel, "magical" describes his experience of making The Last Airbender. "My character in Slumdog and my character in this really do have some sort of comparison where they both have this one-track determination. Jamal in Slumdog wanted to find his long-lost love and would do anything from being tortured by the police to going on this game show and making a fool of himself. Zuko is going to be the exact same but putting his life on the line in a different way to capture this boy.

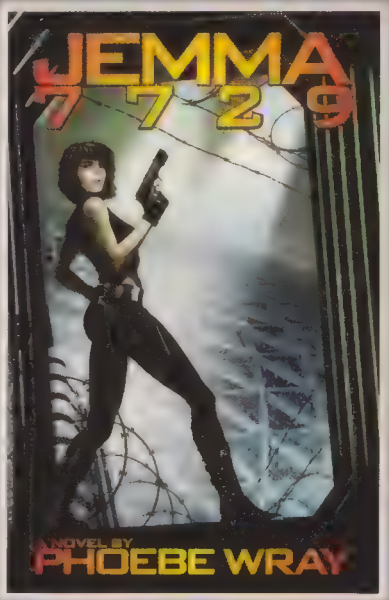
What was most intriguing to me was after I did Slumdog, I think everyone who didn't know my name just knew me as the wide-eyed boy from that Slumdog film. I've been constantly trying to stop myself from getting typecast, especially being Asian. This was exciting to me because I could play a character named Zuko, and it's in a mythical world. And I have this dark side, which is very interesting because Jamal was basically a knight in shining armor. He could really do no wrong. Zuko is the polar opposite. He's always making mistakes, and he has to live with a mistake on his face. It's really interesting: the martial arts and the CGI. It's a whole different thing altogether for me, and that's why I really wanted to do it. I'm constantly throwing myself in the deep end."

About working with Shyamalan, Patel says, "He works you hard, he really does. I really struggled playing the character, because it was a big stretch for me. I'd never done anything like it before, let alone a film this big. Slumdog had a budget of $14 million." Pausing, Patel jokes, "I think the costume cost more than what I got paid [for Slumdog Millionaire]. This film is a whole different thing altogether. It's a whole different world altogether, it really is."

Finally, like the twist in a typical M. Night Shyamalan movie, Patel reveals what might be the answer to the mystery of why this director would do something so seemingly uncharacteristic as adapt a TV cartoon show to an epic film. "His daughters are big fans of the show, so he has a lot to live up to. I think his harshest critics are going to be his children."

The Future is not quite what we hoped or expected.

The repressions and civil wars made a mess of things. Nothing works and nobody gives a damn. Well, some do — Jemma, for instance, who discovers that what the Administrative Government of North America tells her is a pack of lies. When her father takes her into the Countryside, and she sees the stars in a free night sky, she begins to doubt everything she's learned. And to challenge it.



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Daniel Dos Santos:

On Painting Tough Girls and Giving Back

By Karen Haber

Dan Dos Santos is only twenty-seven but has already achieved a goal which many artists would envy. He has painted one of the most iconic images to grace a book cover in recent publishing history: Mercy Thompson, mechanic/shapeshifter and runner with the *really* big dogs—werewolves—from Patricia Briggs's *New York Times* best-selling series.

The painting, *Moon Called,* won the 2007 Chesley Award for Best Cover Illustration for a Paperback, and inspired the other covers that Dan has painted for Briggs's Mercy Thompson series as well as the related Alpha and Omega series. At least one of the paintings is owned by the author herself, and another by fellow artist Jon Foster. Although Dan enjoys painting tough girls with paranormal tendencies and big hairy friends, he likes something else even better: giving back.

Dan credits a high school art teacher with mentoring him and changing his life. He obviously feels a debt of gratitude and he is paying it forward, with workshops and with online assistance to young artists through Conceptart.org

Good humored, quick thinking and speaking, and *very* focused on his work, Dan likes to paint alone, saying: "I don't play well with others." But his most famous image to date was

arrived at via teamwork. Despite his protests otherwise, he's such a good sport and so supportive of fellow artists and friends that he accepted the 2009 Best Artist Hugo on behalf of Donato Giancola, even as he lost the award himself.

The Evolution of an Icon

The idea for the first cover image of Mercy Thompson began with a request from an art director for a female mechanic posing with hands in pockets, with a pawprint tattoo on her abdomen.

"I'd sent in roughs with werewolves in the background," Dan says. "Then they told me they only wanted to insinuate the werewolves rather than show them, so we decided on the gates.

"I thought that the pawprint tattoo looked lonely, and that she would look so cool with all these tattoos on her. I took pictures of the painting, worked it up with tattoos in Photoshop, sent it in, and they liked it so much that Patty decided to write the tattoos into the book! Literally everybody had a little part in the conversation: artist, art director, and writer.

"The model for Mercy is a bartender I know. She and her family get a big kick out of seeing the covers and paintings. And just to remind you that art and imagination are involved in painting these covers, the model doesn't have any tattoos." Neither does the artist. More on that in a moment.

"I've done all the covers for the Mercy Thompson books, except for the Science Fiction Book Club edition. Five portraits, including the new comic book, *Homecoming.*"

What effect has the acclaim for his Mercy covers had on the artist? He decided to just say no. "I realized that if I didn't take a stand and stop painting tattooed ladies, I'd be doing it all year, every year."

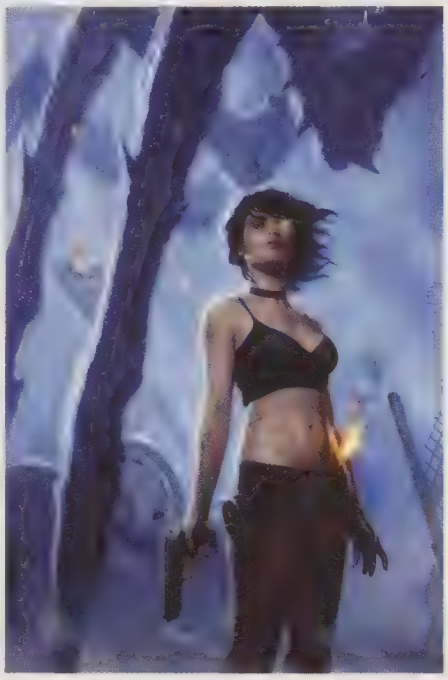
No More Tattoos, Please

"People want to typecast you. I literally could have painted only tattooed-people book covers. But I don't want to be 'The Tattoo-Guy.'"

And while Dan may be able to paint wonderful pictures of tattooed tough girls, he only has *one* tattoo himself: a small one, extremely personal, to which he reluctantly agreed, under pressure.

Not only does he not want another tattoo, he doesn't want to design them, either.

"As a rule, I don't design them for people. I wouldn't let somebody else design my painting for me, so I don't think somebody should design a tattoo who isn't a tattooist. I get asked constantly to design tattoos but I don't like to do it. There are a lot of tattoo artists out there with great skills, and



they know how to design for the human body. I don't.

"I think it's a total fad and I'm uncomfortable with the idea of committing to a fashion statement for life. People are trying to fill their whole body up while they're young, fill up an entire arm by summertime. It shouldn't be as much about vanity and fashion as it is. What will they think about it later?"

Tough Girls? Not a Problem

He's been so successful at diversifying his cover assignments that he is now one of the go-to-guys for fantasy art directors. A recent cover, for Jay Lake's novel, *Green*, has an attention-grabbing image of a girl hanging upside down that is rumored to be a nominee for the next round of Chesley Awards.

Dan has so much work to do that he must plan a year's painting schedule very carefully. Although he'll take a pass on tattoos, he still loves painting tough girls.

"I grew up on comic books where everybody is tough: the guys are tough, the girls are tough. So the strong woman as subject was no problem. It's what I've always drawn. I prepared for science fiction art in school, but got a fantasy job first—a unicorn—and became accustomed to the visual tropes of that field. And I keep getting more and more tough girl covers. It probably has something to do with the nature of the literature. More than half of what I do is vampire-related. There's been an incredible increase in vampire literature, and there are a *lot* of tough women characters in these books."

Hand Skills Versus Digital

"It's this constant inner battle, hand skills versus digital. I think that the love affair with digital is a fad. In twenty years' time people are going to miss analog skills. They're going to want to see paintings.

"I learned oil paints very traditionally. I picked this medium because you can make them look like anything. You can't make those other mediums do that. And if you know how to paint, you can pick up Photoshop easily, but not vice versa.

"When I graduated college, Photoshop was just taking off. I learned it and began using it for preliminary sketches. It saves so much time. And for print work, Photoshop work is easier and looks better. But I just won't go there for the final product.

"I love having an actual painting, a product we can hold in our hands. There's never going to be an LCD Museum, and you want to have something tangible left over. I want to give a client something to hold in their hands, a finished work."

Master of Face and Figure

The strength of his painting is his mastery of the face and figure. Dan excels at portraiture. He can paint tight or loose, work with painterly effects, and he always creates a dynamic composition, never losing his original emphasis: portraiture. Each of his paintings conveys the sense of a living breathing individual.

His ease at the easel seems to invite art directors to pile on the subjects. He laughs about it and says, "Bring 'em on! One? Three? Even better.

"It takes me two weeks to do a painting," he says, "including reading the manuscript, model shoots, and so on. It's always a rush. I wish I had three weeks for each painting but I don't. I have to paint two a month to make a living. Right now I have two covers going simultaneously, but I usually do them in sequence. I don't split my focus very well.

"I don't do *Magic* cards much anymore, although I love them, they're like painting miniatures, because the digital guys can do them faster and better.

"I like painting women, but beyond that it's about the portrait: the subject is really the person. A particular visual I read in a book gets me excited and gives me a key image to work on, something as simple as a haircut. For example, in *Black Blade Blues* there's a tough female lead fighting dragons in Seattle, with nice cool urban fantasy elements, which I always like. She's a blacksmith, and she has half a shaved head with white hair and a black sword and glowing red runes. You can't go wrong!

"Models really make a difference. I go out of my way to find exceptional models. A lot of my favorite models are not professionals—most pros don't work for illustrators. You really need an actor more than a model. People have so much individual character, it helps bring a different flavor to each cover."

Giving Back

"In a way I feel a sort of sense of obligation. I had a great teacher in high school and it definitely changed the course of my life. So if somebody wants to learn how to paint and I can show them, it's my obligation to show them."

Part of the way he pays it forward is by doing paintovers for Conceptart.org, in which he literally corrects young artists' work, overpainting it to show them how to realize their artistic goals more effectively.

"The Internet has changed everything, forever. My entire profession relies on it. It's amazing: a kid in Albania can be having trouble painting a belt and a guy in Ohio can help him five minutes later. I do it while I'm eating breakfast.

"I also participated in a five-hour instructional DVD for Massive Black, the company behind Conceptart.org, because I'm aggravated with the price of demonstration DVDs. I'm unhappy about the cost of workshops. That's why I started working on Art Out Loud with Irene Gallo, the art director at Tor. Last September, a group of artists painted together in a simultaneous demonstration at the Society of Illustrators in New York for four hours while people walked around, watched, and asked questions.

"I used to teach formally at the University of Bridgeport, but it was just a job. The teaching gigs I do now are *so* much fun. Those students are just voracious. They *want* to be there, and it gets you pumped up."

Awards, Long Range Plans, and Game Playing

Dan's latest award was the 2009 Chesley for Best Product Illustration for a *Hellboy 2* poster. "That was a dream job on many levels. I'm a big fan of the comic and I really loved doing it. It's a big imposing piece of art. I would still love to paint movie posters and renew that art form, but the market has disappeared.

"I want to do more movie work—conceptual, and actual design. I just did some costume design for the lead character in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, starring Nicolas Cage, and really enjoyed it.

"I also want to do more comic book covers. And I'd like to work on writing comics or children's books. Most likely I'll do picture books. But I've got to make the time for that.

"I play online games before bed to get the painting out of my system. I play *Call of Duty,* with a friend, just before bedtime. I like RPGs, and Stealth games; I just beat *Fallout Three, Bioshock*—I'm definitely behind on these games because I don't have the time to check out all the new ones. But I'm going to have to get ready. I've got two sons under the age of five, and I call them 'Player Two' and 'Player Three.'"

From tattooed ladies to comic book icons, Dan wants to paint them all. As he said above: "Bring 'em on!"

"I've always known exactly what I wanted to do. I very much believe that anybody can achieve any goal. The hard part is knowing the goal to achieve."

See more by Daniel Dos Santos' at: http://www.dandossantos.com.

Super Family

by Ian Donald Keeling

illustration by Eric Fortune

Which is worse at 15—finding out that your parents are human or finding out that they're totally not?

HE DOES NOT WANT TO GO HOME.

The man thinks this as he descends from the sky. He lands beside the abandoned industrial complex five blocks from his home. Changes into his street clothes.

He always walks the final five blocks to his house. It allows him to collect his thoughts.

Usually.

The timepiece on his wrist chirps twice. "Jesus Christ, Max," the man mutters, "I'm done for the day."

"I know it's late," a voice from the timepiece says, "but we've got the Elastic Band holed up inside Studio 2. You seemed a little glum today. Nothing like a cakewalk against a couple of punching bags to brighten up your evening."

For a moment, he thinks of going. The Elastic Band are the most incompetent super-villains on the planet. And they can take a lot of punishment. This makes fighting them one of the more satisfying methods of catharsis. As his wife was fond of saying, "They're the most fun you can have saving the planet."

They used to have so much fun…

"I can't," he says abruptly. "It's closing time and, besides, I promised Jean—"

He stops. Beside him, seven crumbling concrete silos stand in a row, stark against the shock-white of the moon. They mark the boundary of the industrial and residential areas of Archangel City.

"Oh, shit," he whispers.

"What?"

"I promised Jean I'd be home early." His head descends into the palm of his right hand. "I'm supposed to take Mel to a concert."

"Really? Who?"

"Motorfinger."

A laugh on the other end. "They're pretty loud, Kirb."

He watches the moon light up a fast-moving cloud. "I figured they would be."

"Well, I'll leave you to it. Say hi to Jeannie for me."

"Right."

The timepiece goes silent and the moon comes out from behind the clouds. And Kirby "Magnet Man" Walker begins walking again, stepping into the residential area of town.

HE OPENS HIS FRONT DOOR TO THE SOUND OF BATTLE.

"You are not leaving the house wearing that, young lady!"

"Mom, I'm fifteen: I can wear what I want!"

Kirby pinches the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. Exhales. So it has come to this. Sitcom screaming and Daddy's tired, home from work. He tries to

remember the last time someone in this house wasn't yelling at someone else.

Down the hall, a baby starts to cry.

"Now look what you've done."

"Me? I'm not the one who started yelling."

"Good evening, everyone," Kirby says quietly, entering the kitchen.

His wife is by the stove, a nine-month-old infant in her arms. There's spittle in her jet-black hair and a burp-stain on her right shoulder. Her eyes are jade and dead-set angry. His wife is never more beautiful or frightening than when she's angry. And she's facing—

"You're late." His daughter turns, grabs two tickets from the kitchen table, and waves them in his face. "We have to go."

Melissa. The first of his two daughters. For the first fourteen years of her life, Daddy's Little Girl. The quiet light of his heart.

Now she's standing there, arms akimbo, wearing too much makeup and not nearly enough of anything else.

He sighs. Mousy and cute, he could have handled. Awkward and shy, he could have handled. Even if she had gone punk—nose-rings, green hair, whatever—he could have handled it. He had prepared for some teenage adversity.

The only thing for which he had not prepared was for his daughter to turn out exactly like her mother.

He glances at his wife. His daughter's skirt might be a little too high and those boots not nearly low enough, but he remembers what Jean used to wear when she was working. His daughter is wearing less than that, but not a whole lot less.

"In a minute, honey."

"No." His daughter stamps her foot. "We don't have a minute. The Donkeys are probably already on stage."

"The Donkeys?"

"Kirby, tell your daughter that she's not—"

"I can wear what I want!"

"All right," he says, trying to sound firm. The baby begins to cry louder. "I think we can dispense with the shouting." He takes a breath. Looks at his daughter. "Melissa, your father is very tired. I've had a hard day…"

Her eyes go wide. "You're not coming."

"I didn't say that, I just need a moment—"

"You promised."

"I know I did and we'll go—"

"FINE!" his daughter screams. She slams one of the tickets down on the table. "I DIDN'T WANT YOU TO COME ANYWAY!" She storms down the hallway.

"Melissa, you can't—"

"GO TO HELL!"

The front door slams like a gunshot. But it's the words that stun him into silence. Just like that, the night spins out of control. When did his daughter get so angry?

"You…promised."

He turns to find his wife glaring at him. "Jean, I'm going to go to the concert with her, I—"

"Really?" His wife glances towards the sink, stacked with pots. On the counter rests a dinner plate, still full.

"That's why you came home early like you said you would?"

He closes his eyes. "It was the Ghetto Gang. We had to—"

"The Ghetto Gang are a joke. You could have passed them off to Flare or Burst or a dozen others. Or can't the world survive without Magnet Man now? Funny, it seems to have survived without me."

He goes still. This is very dangerous ground. He tries to change the subject.

"Where's Rebecca?"

"Studying at Tiffany's. Don't change the subject."

"I wasn't—"

"You know," his wife says, bouncing the baby in her arms, "I think maybe someone should go after our daughter. Someone who said he'd be home tonight. Someone who doesn't have to stay at home with the baby."

A silence, save the child, crying.

"Do you want to go after her, Jean?" He tries to sound reasonable. "If you want to go, I can stay with Michael."

"No, I think I better stay." She hurls it at him like a spear.

He takes a breath. "Jean…" Another. "You can't keep holding the baby over my head. It isn't fair to Michael. It isn't fair to the girls."

Her eyes flash. She opens her mouth to speak…

HE IS STANDING, ALONE, ON HIS PORCH IN THE MOONLIGHT.

He looks up at the moon. Twenty years ago, he had stood on its surface, Jean standing beside him. They had been married by the light of the planet they had sworn to protect.

A long time ago.

She is so angry. He knows why, he knows what he has done. Her anger is justified. He just wishes he could find a way…

He does not want to lose his wife. But it has been eighteen months. And she is still so angry.

As is, apparently, Melissa. He blinks and looks away from the moon. His wife can wait. He needs to find his daughter.

He shifts his perception slightly. And the world dissolves into light.

Every single electromagnetic particle on the planet glimmers in his eyes like a billion tiny diamonds. Each one unique. The houses along the street have been decorated by Christmas fiends. The trees lining the street are fountains of ice.

This is the world that Kirby sees, a world of patterns and light, a world that keeps him sane and reminds him, every day, that there is something worth the fight.

The trail left by a human being—five minutes old, fading now—streams away into the night like stardust.

He could fly and catch her quickly, but he is fairly certain that his daughter remains unaware of her parents' true identities. There will come a day, soon, when he will have to sit with Melissa and Rebecca and tell them that their

mother and father are two of the most powerful people on the planet.

But, given the way the night has gone so far—he grimaces—tonight is not the night for revealing secrets.

His daughter's last words, screamed at him as she storms out of the house. He feels the door slam in his bones. Melissa has never screamed like that at him. Ever.

Kirby Walker is losing his wife. He can't afford to lose his daughter.

Splash.

He takes two steps beyond the puddle and stops. Looks back. He looks up into the clear moonlit sky, the only strips of cloud high and in the jet stream, whipping through the night.

Did it...?

"Find your daughter, Kirby," he says out loud, shaking off his shoes. "Focus on the problem at hand."

The trail is getting brighter, the stardust thicker. She couldn't be too far now, perhaps at the next lights...

Splash.

"That was definitely not there when I put my foot down."

It could be nothing. It's probably nothing, he thinks, approaching the traffic lights. He's off duty, in civilian clothes. Only four people know that plain old Kirby Walker is actually Magnet Man. One is his wife. One is Max. One was last seen being thrown into a black hole. And the forth, he is pretty sure, can't make puddles. Still...

He widens his scan. No one in sight. His daughter's trail brightens as it enters the park on the opposite corner. She must be...

A glimmering at his feet as he steps off the curb.

Plunge.

He's down three feet before he realizes that he's looking up at the surface. He can't find bottom. The water is bitterly cold.

And that, Kirby Walker decides, is just about enough.

With a practiced assurance, he gathers the fields of energy surrounding him and rises to the surface. Walks across the water as if it were made of glass.

He stops at the opposite corner and looks back. The puddle is gone.

"What the hell?" He tightens the field and prepares to force the water from his clothes. He looks around.

Stops.

About forty yards inside Archeology Park, someone is standing still, looking in his direction. He recognizes the energy signature instantly. How could he not, he's had it etched on his heart for fifteen years. Melissa.

Did she see him? He glances back at the place where he had exercised his power. It was a distance, and in darkness, despite the moon.

He enters the park, still dripping wet. The night is cold, almost bitter, but there is still a chance she doesn't know who he is.

The moonlight chisels her body into a work of marble. She's wearing a coat that's too large, a skirt that's too short, and a pair of boots that are too high. He stops three feet away, dripping.

Her head is cocked to one side, her eyes wary. Perhaps she didn't...

"How did you do that?"

So much for that idea. He tries bluffing. "Do what?"

"Get out of the water."

So much for bluffing. He deliberately looks around and then over his shoulder. "Oh, the puddle, by the street? It's okay, it wasn't that deep. I, uhh...tripped."

Her eyes twitch. "No, you didn't. You didn't trip. And that puddle was ten feet deep."

Now, how did she know that? "Look, honey—"

"Don't 'Look, honey' me," she says, her voice beginning to rise. "How did you do that?"

"Honestly, honey, I think—"

"I said—"

"Good evening, Kirby."

Father and daughter turn.

A man stands fifteen feet away. In the shadows, he looks tiny and frail. He's holding something in his hands.

Kirby recognizes him instantly. Oh god, not him. Not now. This day has been horrendous. He refuses to let it become absurd.

"Not now, Frances. Go bother somebody else."

The man steps close enough for the moonlight to define his features. He has the kind of haircut fathers give their children when they don't realize they're being cruel. The glasses on the end of his nose could be used for coffee tables. He's holding a laptop computer.

The man smiles. "Really, Kirby, is that any way to greet an old friend?"

"I'm serious, Frances. This is not the time. If you want to play, go find Max. I think he's at Studio 2. If you hurry, you might even get some help."

"Dad, who is this?" Melissa says suddenly. "What the hell are you two talking about?"

Behind the blocks of glass, the man's eyes go wide. "Dad?" A smile spreads across his face that makes him look like a demented pumpkin. His voice, however, is oddly strained. "Oh, how very precious."

"Frances, I swear to God..."

Suddenly, the man stabs a finger at the laptop and several things happen at once. First, the computer springs from the man's hands and begins to float, several feet away.

That's new, Kirby thinks.

Second, a soft glow surrounds the man and the computer. Finally, an arm—bigger than the laptop itself—emerges from the computer, snakes across the moonlight, and snatches Melissa to the man's side.

"Dad!" Melissa squeals.

"All right, Frances, that's enough," Kirby barks with more command than he feels. "She isn't one of us." Quietly, he gathers the energy around him. How can he do this without Melissa knowing? He is fairly certain Frances won't hurt her.

"Relax, Kirby," the man says. "I won't hurt her." He grabs her left arm. "So…is this Melissa or Rebecca?"

"It's Melissa, dickweed," she snaps, twisting in his grip. "Let me go."

"Frances, let her go." It would have to be quiet. It would have to be something he hadn't done before.

"Relax, Kirby. I'm just—"

"No," Melissa says. Her body shimmers…

And Kirby Walker watches his eldest daughter turn into water.

Her skin ripples in the moonlight like molten glass. "I said…" She pulls her liquid arm free from her captor. Sprints away, leaving tiny puddles in her wake. Stops after twenty strides. Turns.

"…let me go," she finishes. "Dickweed."

"Holy shit," Frances says.

"Holy shit," Kirby says.

The man with the computer recovers first. He turns on Kirby.

"You lied to me," he whines. "She isn't a civilian at all. She's—"

Once he recovers, Kirby doesn't hesitate. A dozen questions rip through his mind, but one thing is for certain.

No more need for secret identities.

He feels his costume change even as he releases an energy spike at the computer that would fry several city blocks.

And is shocked for the second time in less than a minute when nothing happens.

The pumpkin smile is back. "That won't work this time, Kirby. As a matter of fact, nothing you do will work."

"I doubt that." His second surge is no more effective than his first.

"Doubt away. This time, I shielded everything."

Kirby blinks. "You what?"

"That's right," the man crows. "It's magnet-proof. You can't beat me." He actually does a little dance. "You can't—"

He's still dancing when a huge pool of water appears over his head.

And falls.

It drenches the man and the computer at his side. Something sizzles, and the nimbus of light disappears. A single pocking sound, like a knot exploding in firewood. Then…

"Guess you forgot to make it waterproof. Dickweed."

Kirby turns to find his daughter, her head cocked to one side, gazing at Frances with a contempt that only teenagers can master.

"You wrecked my laptop!"

Kirby turns back to Frances.

"I'll kill you!" Frances squeaks at Melissa.

Kirby opens his mouth to deal with that threat…and then bursts into laughter.

It has been a horrible day. And now Frances is standing there, threatening his daughter, looking like a disillusioned mop. His laptop keeps making sizzling sounds.

"With what?" Melissa drawls, taunting Frances. "Your eyeglasses? That's a nice paperweight you've got there."

Frances stamps his feet like a seven-year-old in the rain. Mud splatters. His computer pops again.

Kirby can't stop laughing.

A splatter of mud strikes Melissa's dress. For the first time, she looks angry. "What are you—like—*four?*" She flicks the mud away and rubs at the spot.

Frances makes a sound like a steam kettle. Kirby suddenly imagines the mop of hair on the man's head bursting into the sky like a champagne cork.

"This is Dolce & Gabbana, asshole."

"All right," Kirby croaks. It's about time he got himself under control. "You don't need to use that kind of language, young lady. He's beaten."

"He's an—"

"Melissa Francine Walker." He says it firmly, without anger. Straightens up. She takes the hint.

Or, at least, she would have, if Frances doesn't screech: "Beaten? *Beaten?* I'm not beaten! I'll—"

"Shut up, Frances." Father and daughter say it as one.

Melissa glances at her father. She giggles nervously.

Kirby smiles back. Then he reaches into the earth with his power. He locates a vein of metal—feels like lead—about fourteen feet down and pulls some to the surface. Forms it into a thick cord and binds Frances's arms, hands, and feet. On a whim, he flattens out a section and wraps it around the man's mouth.

He does all of this in less than five seconds.

"There." He drives part of the cord back into the earth, pinning Frances to the spot. "Now I can think."

Melissa is staring at him, eyes wide. "Holy shit. You're Magnet Man."

Kirby sighs. So much for watching her language. "Yes, I am. Honey, I think we need to talk." It isn't too great of an understatement.

Melissa looks at Frances, bound and gagged by metal. "You're Magnet Man," she says again. "Holy shit."

Suddenly, she goes still. "Wait a minute." She turns. "You can't be Magnet Man. You don't look anything like him."

He suppresses a smile. She's already caught Frances's name and used it against him. And now this. She's very quick.

He looks around, pursing his lips in thought. "There's a baseball diamond nearby where I sometimes sit when I need to figure things out." He nods in the general direction. "Why don't we sit and have a conversation?" Without waiting for her reply, he gently grabs her elbow and steers her away from Frances.

They get about fifty feet before she stops. "Wait a minute." She looks back at Frances. "What about him?"

"He isn't going anywhere. Besides, even if he could move, the cops are more than capable of handling someone like Laptop."

"Laptop?"

"That's what he calls himself. Frances is his given name."

Her gaze tightens. "And how do you know that? How come he knew your name?"

He jerks his head in the direction of the bleachers. "All in good time."

They walk the remainder of the distance in silence. The moonlight casts the baseball diamond in a brilliant chalky white. Kirby steps up onto wooden slats bleached an oddly vivid gray, crisscrossed by chain-link shadows. He stops about halfway down the row. Turns to face his daughter. Sits. She does the same.

A long pause.

Then, at nearly the same instant, they both take a deep breath and say: "So, you're a superhero."

Kirby's smile is immediate. He chuckles. He'd meant the words as a joke, hoping to deflate some of the tension. Apparently, his daughter thought along similar lines.

She smiles back at him. "You first. Are you really Magnet Man?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

Her father has just confirmed that he's one of the most powerful people on the planet. A minute ago, her mouth had dropped in teenaged awe. This time, Melissa just nods, her eyes shrewd. She's thinking of questions. She starts with the obvious one.

"Why don't you look like him?"

"Actually, it's Magnet Man that doesn't look like me."

She frowns, and he holds up his arm. "See this? This is my wristwatch. The same one I always wear. But it doesn't look the same anymore, does it?"

She shakes her head.

"All right, here's a history lesson. A long time ago there was a superhero named Device. The first superhero. He didn't really have any super powers, except for the fact that he was probably the smartest man who ever lived. He built devices. With them, he fought crime. He was a good superhero, fought in World War Two with the Fighting Americans, but that's not why he's so important. He's important because of what he did after he retired. What he did for us."

He takes a deep breath. "After the war, he decided there were enough superheroes that he wasn't needed publicly. He retired, and began doing work for all the other heroes. He designed our costumes. He designed an elaborate communications network. And he designed a way for us to have secret identities that actually work. He designed these." He held up his wrist again.

His first memory. He's two years old. There's a man snapping the device around Kirby's wrist. The device and the man's hair are an identical shade of silver.

He blinks suddenly. This was hard. It shouldn't be this hard, it's been almost two years...

"What Device told me," he says firmly, fighting the constriction in his throat, "is that, in essence, this is an imaging device. For everything. TVs, cameras, audio recorders... people. When we're working, it sends an image of our public superhero identity to the world in all manner possible. All our real characteristics—body, face, voice, name—are hidden. Hell, we probably don't even smell the same."

"Then how come you don't look like that now?"

A broken smile. "That's part of the genius. The device ignores anyone who knows the truth. Once you figured it out, it began treating you the same way it treated Device. Or your mother. And—before you ask—I don't know how they work. Or how my costume appears when I want it to, or how a dozen and one other things Device did for us work. I doubt there are more than a handful of people on the planet even smart enough to guess. They just work. They let us have a life outside of what we do. They give us that sanity. Device gave us that. All of us. He was like a godfather to us all." He whispers the last.

His daughter is studying him intently in the moonlight. "Dad...are you all right?"

He is not going to cry in front of his daughter. It's ridiculous. They have a million other things to worry about. It shouldn't be this hard. It's been two years—it shouldn't still...

"We were very close," he says abruptly. "Device and I. He...he was a good friend."

"Was?"

She is so quick. The quiet light of his heart.

"He died. About two years ago. I'm sorry...it's still hard sometimes." He very much wants to say: *Sometimes I don't know what to do without him.* But this is his daughter. She doesn't need to hear such things. Not now. So, instead, he says: "I miss him."

His daughter studies him for a moment. "Did I ever meet him? I mean, like in his—" she searches for the right word—"normal identity?"

Another broken smile. "I don't think Device had a normal identity. He didn't like to use his real name. Ever." He glances back across the park to the spot where they had left Laptop pinned to the ground. "And no, he never came by the house. You and Rebecca never showed any signs of power, so he didn't consider you a part of his world. He was odd that way. I think he might have been trying to protect you.

"Which brings us back to you." He takes a deep breath. Glances in the direction of Laptop. Then looks at his daughter, sitting on the bench in an oversized coat and undersized clothes. Like a normal teenager. Which, from now on, is no longer true.

"It looks like you were part of his world after all."

He isn't certain, but she might be blushing in the moonlight.

"How long have you known?"

She toes the bench, taking her time. Kirby gives it to her.

"About eight months," she says finally. "I was working on a book report and the 'D' on my keyboard kept sticking. I kept getting more and more frustrated, until finally I slammed my fist down and screamed. And then it turned into water. Flooded my whole desk. I didn't know what had happened, but I was so worried you and Mom would freak out, I ran out and bought a new keyboard.

"It didn't happen again for a while, so I figured it was just one of those weird things, like the kind they show on *Did That Really Happen?* Then, three weeks later, my cellphone died when I was telling Sally about—" She stops and flickers a glance in his direction. "When we were talking about something really important." Another glance. "So I

screamed again and my cellphone dissolved. That's when I realized *I* was doing it. And I'd better do something about it, 'cause it was starting to get kinda expensive."

A sudden image of random items around the house dissolving into puddles every time Melissa gets frustrated. He shakes his head. It was a wonder her sister was still in one piece.

Then his daughter goes still.

"I wanted to tell you and Mom," she says. "That's why I wanted you to come to the concert tonight, I...I was going to tell you anyway. I would have told you sooner but I didn't know you were..." Her toe begins to grind into the bench. "I mean, I was afraid you'd think I was a..."

There's so much need in her voice Kirby can't keep silent.

"Oh, honey..."

"No, don't." She takes a few steps along the bench, waving her arms as if she were swatting something away. "I know, it's stupid. I know, you'd never...I mean, you and Mom..." She squeezes the guardrail, as if holding it from flight.

Then, suddenly, her head comes up. "Wait a minute." The toe stops grinding into the bench.

"Is Mom a superhero too?"

He blinks. "Honey...we're talking about you right now."

"She is, isn't she?" Her eyes go wide, her own story forgotten. "Which one? Is she Beauty Queen?"

She's so far off the mark, Kirby coughs. "No," he says firmly. "She isn't Beauty Queen."

"Then which one? Iridium? Willow? Windshear?"

Kirby sighs. He can't keep up. Teenagers.

"She's Amazon."

His daughter's face snaps back as if she's been slapped. "Fuck...off."

It takes him a second to see she's not angry.

Perhaps she realizes this, because immediately she says, "Sorry. I didn't mean...it's just...Mom's Amazon? *The* Amazon?"

Once he realizes it's awe and not rage he relaxes again. "Little more impressive than Magnet Man, huh?"

"No," she says quickly. "I mean—"

"It's all right, honey." He chuckles. He's pretty sure she has posters of her mother on her bedroom walls. "You don't need to keep explaining yourself to me. I find her pretty stunning myself.

"However," he says, as his daughter turns back to the baseball field and begins to mutter things like *Amazon?* and *Wow!* into the night, "we were talking about you. We can talk about your mother and me a little—"

"Where'd she go?"

He blinks. "I beg your pardon?"

"Mom. Amazon. No one's seen her in, like, more than a year."

Now Kirby goes still. This is not a safe topic of conversation.

"Uhhh..."

"Some of the kids at school think she retired. But that's bullshit, she's too young. Sally says Poleaxe killed her but that's bull—" She stops.

"Oh God."

She turns. Looks him in the eye.

"It's Michael, isn't it?"

Her voice sounds as if a black hole has just opened inside her heart.

It isn't fair. For a few moments, on a set of bleachers by the light of the moon, all the failures of the past two years had been forgotten. For a few moments, only Kirby and Melissa, father and daughter. The quiet light of his heart. Now...

He is not ready to have this conversation. She's too quick, he doesn't know how much she knows; but there's a horror in her voice, a horror he has heard before, a horror he has to address, but he isn't—*How the hell did this just happen?*

Then, just as he is struggling to catch up, a shadow descends from the sky and a voice that seems to come from everywhere speaks into the night.

"GOOD EVENING, KIRBY WALKER AND DAUGHTER OF KIRBY WALKER."

The shadow is huge and moonlight seems to slip off its glittering black skin. Deep amber flashes, like embers, flicker under its surface. There are no other features.

Oh. My. God.

Again, the voice rumbles into the night. It vibrates up from the ground, the trees, the sky, pitched to reach only his ears.

"WE MUST SPEAK, KIRBY WALKER AND DAUGHTER OF KIRBY WALKER."

Not only his. His daughter looks out across the ball field at the glittering shadow more than a hundred times her size and says: "Who the fuck are you?"

"Melissa..."

The voice ignores them both. "YOU WILL FOLLOW. DO NOT SEND OUT A NATIONAL, KIRBY WALKER. WE WILL SPEAK ALONE, KIRBY WALKER AND DAUGHTER OF KIRBY WALKER. YOU WILL FOLLOW. IF YOU OBEY, I WILL...KEEP THIS PRIVATE." It pauses...and then moves away, across the park with appalling speed.

A moment of nothing but the moonlight. Then...

"What the hell was that?" Melissa breathes, her eyes like satellite dishes.

"First things first." He could function like this. The night had just become much worse, but he understood this kind of pressure. "You're going home."

"No, I'm not. What was that thing?"

"Yes, you are. This is not a game, Melissa, and I don't have time for explanations. I have to follow him before any real damage is done. Go home."

"No." Her eyes are no longer wide. "I can't." She asks a third time: "What was that thing?"

There isn't time for this. "His name is Top2, but don't ever call him that to his face. Now go home."

"What should I call him to his face?"

"For the love of god, Melissa, there isn't time!"

She stands there as if rooted to the world. For the moment, she looks exactly like her mother.

"Then we have to make some," she says. "Because I'm coming with you."

Coming with—? "No, you are not."

"Yes, I am. That thing, Top2—"

"Don't call him that."

"Then what should I call him?"

"Frances."

She blinks. "What, like—"

"Melissa, there isn't—"

"*Stop saying there isn't time!*" Her whole body ripples, then subsides. "I know there isn't time. But that thing—Top2, Frances, whatever the hell you want to call it—that thing said to follow it."

"Honey—"

"And it said: 'Kirby Walker and daughter of Kirby Walker.'"

That stops him. Top2 had said that. And Top2 was always very specific.

"And...it said that, if we obeyed, it would 'keep this private.' Now, I don't know what that means, but it sure the hell sounds a lot better than making it public. So I have to come with you, whether you like it or not. So stop telling me to go home and start telling me what I need to know about that thing. What did he mean by 'keep this private'?"

Before she's finished speaking, he's changed his mind. Until he knows what this is about—he prays he's wrong—he's not going to risk angering Top2.

"I'll explain as we go."

She falls into stride beside him. "Can't we fly?"

Can she fly, too? No, she was talking about him. She would have seen Magnet Man on TV.

"I could," he says, "but we need to talk. We'll follow his trail"—a vast, glittering gouge through the night—"and as long as he keeps his promise, I'll take the time to explain a few things."

The trail crosses near to where Laptop lies spiked to the ground. To their left, Kirby can see a shadow flailing away in the moonlight.

"How come that thing and the twerp share the same name?" Melissa asks, looking over her shoulder at Frances.

"Laptop designed Top2. Hence the name."

"*That* idiot?"

"Laptop's not stupid, he's just not a very good super-villain." He shakes his head. Too many threads were coming together tonight. He glances at his wrist. "But every time he comes back, he upgrades his computer."

"Like making it magnet-proof?" He can hear her smile.

"Don't get cocky. Next time you won't be able to rain on it."

"Right."

They exit the park, walking east, a few streets parallel to the path Kirby had followed to find Melissa. "Anyway, now all Laptop's upgrades are operational. New tricks, gadgets, etc. Stuff. But he used to upgrade them differently."

"How different?"

"He made them smarter."

"Oh." A pause as she puts it together. "Oh my god, they went *Matrix* on him!"

"What?"

"Like the movie. Got so smart he couldn't control it."

So very quick. "Exactly. The first time was fourteen years ago. It took the better part of the Palladium League to bring him down. And each time he returns, he's more powerful than before. I'd hoped we'd seen the last of him."

"Why, what happened the last time?"

"Three years ago, Champion threw him into a black hole."

"Oh."

Yeah, Kirby thinks, *Oh.* He glances at the device on his wrist.

As if on cue, Melissa asks, "Shouldn't we get help?"

"Can't. That was the other instruction he gave us: 'Do not send out a National.'" He holds up his wrist-piece. "I could have every superhero on the continent here in minutes. We call it 'a National.' Priority One call. But if we do that, Top2 might not keep this private."

"And that would be bad."

"That would be very bad. There aren't too many things in this universe more dangerous than that machine. Armageddon comes to mind. Maybe Loki."

"Loki? What, like the god?"

"Yes. Like the god."

"Jesus," Melissa breathes. "What do you do with a god?"

He remembers the tree ripping up through City Hall. The One Tree from the center of the world spreading through Archangel City like a virus. He remembers the Combustible Twins rushing into City Hall, heading for the roots of the tree. He remembers the twins become one, and the laughter of a god.

"You chain him back under the earth," Kirby says coldly, "and watch the snake drip venom into his eyes."

"Oh." A flickered, startled glance.

He sighs. "Honey, I'm not trying to terrify you. But this is deadly serious. This is not Laptop or some other minor villain we can laugh at while we truss him up and leave him behind for the cops. There are some forces that do not care about the whims of humanity. They have their own agendas. And they are not minor."

They come to a stop in front of an abandoned industrial complex. The same complex, seen from the other side, that Kirby uses to end his day. They were less than five blocks from his home.

The massive glittering train leads inside.

Of course. Of course Frances would come here. There is an ache in his heart.

He turns to his daughter. She's looking into the complex, waiting for his lead.

"When we go in there, let me handle everything. Don't talk. If you *have* to speak, call him Frances. Under no circumstances do you address him as Top2. Champion gave him that name as an insult and he knows it. If we're polite, he may just talk. We may not have to fight."

He no longer truly believes this, and he's half-expecting her to challenge him. Instead, she looks around intently.

"Dad," she says slowly, as if putting it together, "we're, like, really close to home."

"Yes, honey," he says carefully, not sure where she's going with this. "Yes, we are."

"Couldn't you call Mom? I mean, without putting out one of those national thingies?"

His eyes close. Darkness, then more. He opens his eyes, and sees a bank of clouds streaming past the moon.

"She won't come."

His daughter turns and looks at him. "Because of Michael."

"Yes. Because of Michael."

Her eyes flinch. "But we need her."

"Maybe." He glances inside the complex. Shadows and silver light play over the remains.

"Maybe," he says again. "But Frances didn't mention her. And maybe we don't have to fight him. Either way..." He sighs. "She still wouldn't come. She's with the baby. She takes care of the baby. It's her choice."

His daughter deserves more than this. He knows she's put together more than she has said. She deserves answers. She deserves...

"I KNOW YOU ARE THERE, KIRBY WALKER AND DAUGHTER OF KIRBY WALKER. MAKING ME WAIT IS NOT VERY POLITE."

Melissa glares inside the walls. "Sounds like the bastard has a sense of humor."

"Let's hope so. We don't want to fight."

As they move inside, Kirby could swear he hears his daughter mutter, very softly, "The hell we don't."

It takes them five minutes to pick their way through the ruins. Steel and concrete and glass loom in the moonlight, like the underwater wreckage of some vast ocean liner.

"Isn't this that government complex that blew up last year?" Melissa whispers, stepping over the remains of a wall. The explosion had been heard all over Archangel City. It had blown out the windows of their house.

"It wasn't a government complex," Kirby says, his heart heavy in his chest. He circumvents a wall and emerges into a vast courtyard. On the far side, he can see the remains of the seven concrete silos, which he had passed by from the other side earlier in the night.

Before them, in the midst of ghostly wreckage, stands Top2.

"YOU ARE WALKING, KIRBY WALKER. THIS HAS TAKEN YOU SEVEN MINUTES LONGER TO ARRIVE. WHY HAVE YOU MADE ME WAIT, KIRBY WALKER?"

"It's a nice night, Frances," Kirby replies, trying to mask his fear, praying that the computer just wants to talk. "Besides, I'm supposed to be off duty."

"THAT DID NOT STOP YOU FROM DEFEATING MY FATHER."

"That wasn't my idea, Frances. Your father attacked me when I was trying to go to a concert with my daughter."

The computer shifts slightly, and Kirby curses.

"GREETINGS, DAUGHTER OF KIRBY WALKER."

"It's Melissa," she mutters, glaring at Top2 as if daring it to scare her.

"APOLOGIES. GREETINGS, MELISSA WALKER. YOU HAVE DISPLAYED POWERS TONIGHT THAT ARE NOT ANALOGOUS TO MY PROGRAMMING."

"I'm not sure they're analogous to my programming either."

"Frances," Kirby says, taking a step forward, "whatever you want here tonight, she isn't a part of it. She's only had her powers for eight months. She only attacked your father after he attacked me."

"MY FATHER IS A FOOL. I DO NOT CARE FOR HIM. I AM HERE FOR MY GRANDFATHER. I CANNOT FIND HIM. HIS HOME IS DESTROYED. WHERE IS MY GRANDFATHER?"

Kirby sighs. He was afraid of this.

"You won't find him, Frances. Device is dead."

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Melissa turn her head. Kirby keeps his attention focused on Top2. The next few moments are critical.

There is a short pause, as if the computer were thinking. "WHO HAS DONE THIS? RETRIBUTION MUST BE MADE."

Which was awfully rich, given the source. Top2 has tried to destroy both Laptop and Device several times.

"Do you mean this place?" Kirby says bitterly, looking at rubble. "Your father did this. Blew it up last year on the anniversary of your grandfather's death. Or did you mean that? Because no one did that, Frances. He was one hundred and two years old. Everyone dies sooner or later."

A lie. Or, at least, he had spent the six months following Device's death—if not the last two years—acting as if the words weren't true. He sighs. A homicidal computer has turned him into a hypocrite.

The lights flickering under the computer's skin grind through their patterns, oblivious to the world.

"EVERYONE DOES NOT DIE. YOU WERE MY GRANDFATHER'S CLOSEST STUDENT, KIRBY WALKER. YOU SHOULD HAVE SAVED HIM, KIRBY WALKER."

A twitch, passing through his entire body. "I should have—what?"

"YOU WERE MY GRANDFATHER'S CLOSEST STUDENT, KIRBY WALKER," the computer says, lights flickering. "YOU SHOULD HAVE SAVED HIM, KIRBY WALKER."

A few seconds where he is incapable of thought. A cloud plows past the moon. Then...

"I should have saved him? I should have saved him? You—you fucking—*I should have saved him?*"

Suddenly, his daughter isn't there, his marriage isn't in ruins. Only Kirby and Top2, standing alone in the world.

He takes a step. "Don't you think if I could have saved him, I would have? He...*died*. I could have saved him?" He rushes forward, a pressure in his throat, the computer towering above. "You want to fight...you want to fight—fine—let's go. But don't judge me. Don't you dare...come here...and judge me. You..."

The words slice away and he falls: two solid years of anger and pain and failure seeping from his skin into the moonlit ground. His flesh feels hollow, as if his cells were being sucked into a singularity somewhere near his heart. He wants to weep. But he hasn't wept in two years.

"YOU DID NOT SAVE MY FAMILY, KIRBY WALKER." The voice comes from above him, beneath him, everywhere. Implacable. "I WISH TO SEE IF YOU ARE CAPABLE OF SAVING YOURS."

His head comes up instantly. It isn't fast enough.

An arm emerges from the shadow above. It forms a hand and scoops his daughter into the air.

"Hey!" Melissa squeals.

Her body begins to ripple.

But even as she transforms, she is surrounded by an amber nimbus, flickering in time with the lights beneath the computer's skin.

"YOU WILL NOT ESCAPE IN THE MANNER YOU ESCAPED MY FATHER, MELISSA WALKER. I AM NOT A FOOL."

"We'll see about that."

Suddenly, it's as if the entire sky were filled with the perfect storm. Massive walls of water appear in the air around the computer and begin to pummel its skin like a hurricane. There is a roar like a hundred aircraft engines throttled to full.

For a second, the vehemence of his daughter's attack stuns Kirby. His daughter is generating millions of gallons of water. Out of thin air.

This isn't weather control. The moonlight shining on the carnage is untouched. This is something far beyond weather control. He has seen gods with less power.

It isn't enough.

"YOU WILL NOT DESTROY ME IN THE MANNER YOU DESTROYED MY FATHER'S TOY, MELISSA WALKER. I AM NOT A FOOL."

The implicit threat breaks through Kirby's awe.

He rises into the sky. Bends the lines of force surrounding him until the air crackles.

"If you harm her"—his voice has gone cold—"I will strip you down to atoms and then pull them apart, one by one."

This is bluster. The last time he fought Top2, it had required every hero on the continent. The last time, Jean nearly died. He needs help.

Even as his daughter's assault intensifies, he considers sending out the National. Burst could be here in less than two seconds. Champion in little more. Perhaps together...

"Oh, crap," his daughter swears suddenly. "I am such an idiot."

And Top2, towering into the night, dissolves into a giant puddle.

The splash is enormous. Kirby Walker stares, eyes wide, as water crashes to the ground and a dozen miniature tidal waves storm through the complex. One plows into the eroded remains of the seven concrete silos, and a million droplets shatter into the sky to be lit by the moon.

"Nice," his daughter says, flowing up from the earth.

"Wow," Kirby breathes, letting the field around him relax. "That was—"

"Stupid." Melissa finishes reforming and solidifies. "I was so busy trying to get him wet, I forgot I could just *make* him wet."

"You can *what?*"

"I can turn things into water. Remember, my keyboard. It was the first thing I could do. But then I discovered I could just make water, so I started practicing that. A lot. I think I got a little too addicted to it. I sometimes forget the first thing."

"You sometimes forget..."

His daughter sometimes forgot she could turn things into water. Anything.

Until this moment, with the exception of Champion, Eclectic Man, and possibly his wife, Kirby Walker has considered himself the most powerful human on the planet. But his daughter is talking about powers so complex, so vast...

"I think I might need some training," his daughter says with a nervous giggle. The understatement of the century.

Except that the man who had trained the superheroes, the man who had trained him, was dead. Which left...

He remembers a funeral held two years past. The funeral, and the fight with Laptop after, a fight that had ended so very differently from the one that had occurred tonight, ended with two middle-aged men weeping in the rain.

He remembers, sometime not long after, standing in front of a runaway train and wondering what would happen if he didn't make it stop.

He remembers Jean, the expression on her face as he leaves the house tonight. He thinks of the past two years and all the things...

"Dad?"

He looks up. His daughter is staring at him.

"Dad? Could you say something?"

Her left arm is clutching her right. Her face is a moon in the midst of the glittering rubble of a dead man's home.

He cannot remember the moment his powers were born. They came on in late infancy. They had been a part him for his entire life. Never to be questioned.

He pictures not having powers as a child. Pictures discovering them, as his daughter has, at fifteen. Pictures a car rushing towards him, then crumpling as it strikes a sudden, unforeseen magnetic wall. He does not need to picture how he might have felt had this been his life.

He would have been terrified. Of himself.

He has to stop failing the people he loves.

"I'm sorry, honey," he says, trying not to terrify her further. Her expression doesn't change.

He puts on a smile, the kind of smile he wears when the portrait photographer has made him wait too long for the flash to go off. "Yes, you probably should have some training. We'll find someone..."

"Why not you?"

He sighs. "I'm not sure..." He stops. Her face is bone-white.

He has to stop failing the people he loves.

He takes a deep breath. "Honey, if you want me to train

you, I will. I would be proud to. But..."

Before entering the complex—before they had been interrupted—he'd had a thought.

"But you might deserve more."

Some of the fear fades from her eyes, replaced by uncertainty.

"I've been making a lot of mistakes lately," he says, finally approaching the truth. "I don't want to make any more mistakes with you."

She looks away. He follows her gaze up to the moon.

"I...I overheard you," she says softly, looking into the sky. "You and Mom. Fighting."

"When?"

Her lips twitch. She looks at him. Right in the eye.

"Right." He sighs. "Too many times."

"Did you...? I mean..." She looks away.

And so his failures have come to this. She's known everything from the start. She's too quick, too much like her mother. She's heard them fight.

And so there is really only one question left to ask.

"Did you really do what she says you did?"

And so.

He remembers standing in his kitchen, earlier that night. He remembers the baby crying in his wife's arms. He remembers the burp-stain on Jean's shoulder and the anger in her eyes.

"You can't keep holding the baby over my head," he says. "It isn't fair to Michael. It isn't fair to the girls."

The baby is crying. His wife's eyes flash. She opens her mouth to speak.

"Maybe you should have thought of that before you poked a hole in the condom."

The baby continues to cry.

"Jean, you know I didn't..." He stops.

A silence, save for the baby, crying. His wife's face is set, hard.

"All right," he says softly. He looks down at a concert ticket setting on the kitchen table. "All right. I'll go find Mel."

He stops at the front door. Looks back at his wife. "I'm sorry I was late."

Her expression changes, but he is already turning back, his feet out the door. It shuts behind him.

"Did you really do what she says you did?" his daughter whispers, looking away into the night.

How many times? How many times in the last year have they had that same fight? How many times had she hurled that same accusation at him like a spear? How many times, when they thought the children weren't home?

He closes his eyes. A man should not have to have this conversation with his fifteen-year-old daughter.

Then again, he thinks, opening his eyes, a man should not put himself in a position where he has to have it.

"No," he says, and she looks back at him. "Not exactly. Although, I can understand why she accuses me of doing... what she says I did."

His daughter, holding herself still as if she might dissolve, waits.

He takes a deep breath. Exhales. Says what is true.

"I didn't poke a hole in the condom. Not deliberately. But I did find the hole, in the bathroom. After. Your mother is allergic to the pill. Condoms are the only form of birth-control we use." A fifteen-year-old girl should not have to hear this from her father. He doesn't stop. "There had been a couple of similar instances in the past. I always told her. In time. In time to use the morning-after pill."

His daughter's face is still in the moonlight.

"This time I didn't tell her. Not until we found out she was pregnant. Not until then."

A moment, then his daughter's face twists in the moonlight. "Jesus, Dad," she whispers. "That's..." Her voice catches, struggling to find the right word.

"Wrong?"

"It's worse than that!" she screams, her fists clenched. "You didn't give her a choice. You didn't even..."

"I know."

"Why? Why would you do that?"

He remembers standing in the bathroom, staring at the condom in his hands. Standing still, as still as his daughter has become now. The condom falling into the bowl, the weight of the toilet's flush lever, the condom spinning away...

He remembers standing in front of a train, sometime before...

He opens his mouth to speak.

"Mom said it was because you wanted a son."

"Oh, god." The words escape as if he were deflating. "Honey, I—"

A wet, rushing sound.

Father and daughter turn to see a wall of water, lights flickering beneath its surface, rising into the night. It reaches up to the moon.

"YOU SHOULD HAVE DESTROYED ME WHEN YOU HAD THE CHANCE, KIRBY WALKER AND MELISSA WALKER. NOW..."

"Now..." His daughter's skin begins to ripple.

"No."

It is enough, he thinks.

"No," he says again. His voice has gone cold.

It is enough.

He rises into the sky. Gathers the energy of the world so quickly that, if he's not careful, he might seriously damage the planet.

Two years ago, a man died here. A week later, Kirby wept in the rain. A few months later, there was a train...

He reaches down from the sky with his power and rips every molecule of the creature below him from the skin of the earth.

Maybe you should have thought of that before you poked a hole...

He rises until it becomes difficult to breathe. Remains at that height, even as he continues to propel the water higher, as high as he can without permanently altering the world's magnetic field. In seconds, it becomes a star, crowning an

electromagnetic spike glittering into orbit.

Mom said it was because you wanted...

"I was having..." he spits at the star, his voice cold, his skin crackling with failure and pain and rage, "...a conversation with my daughter."

It is enough.

One hundred and thirty-seven kilometers above the surface of the planet, Kirby Walker begins to strip Top2 down to its atoms and pull them apart.

One by one.

It takes a long time. For the next twenty minutes, most of the Western Hemisphere is treated to the greatest light show in the past sixty-five million years. He shields the world from each electromagnetic pulse. Thirty seconds after he begins, Iridium shows up. Kirby politely asks her to do what she can about the radiation. She takes one look at his face and decides not to ask any questions.

Twenty-one minutes later, he returns to the Earth. Lands near the crumbling remains of abandoned concrete silos. Faces his daughter.

"Jesus Christ, Dad." Her eyes are wide.

"I got tired of being interrupted." The words are glib, but his hands won't stop shaking.

He collapses onto a pile of rubble. He cannot remember ever feeling so drained.

"Melissa," he says, staring at the moonlit brick at his feet, "your father has done a great many stupid things in the last few years. There are a variety of reasons why. None of them are good enough. I have given your mother cause to be more angry with me than I could have possibly imagined. As you said, what I did to her was wrong. Worse than that.

"But I love you and your sister and your brother so very, very much." His head comes up. He looks into his daughter's eyes. "And if I ever did anything to give you cause to doubt that...then that is the worst thing that I have done."

A gleaming in his daughter's eyes that has nothing to do with the power she holds.

"Are you and Mom going to stay together?"

He looks away and exhales sharply. Looks back.

She remains silent, eyes gleaming.

He considers shielding her from the truth, wondering if it would spare her any pain. Realizes that it hasn't up to now.

"I don't know," he says finally. "I think...I think that if not for you and Rebecca and Michael...I think that she probably would have already left. She may still."

He looks up at the moon. He had been married there. A long time ago.

And yet...

"And yet..." he says, remembering the final look on his wife's face. "And yet, your mother is one of the most generous, forgiving people I know." A small smile. "She forgave her sister."

"Who's her sister?"

"Shockwave."

"Shockwave? Didn't she try to kill you once?"

"She did more than that."

He remembers cradling his infant daughter in his arms as Archeology Park explodes around him. The look on his wife's face when she arrives, a look he won't see again until an autumn morning nearly fourteen years later, two days after an appointment with her doctor.

"And she forgave her?"

"Hmm?" He blinks, finds his daughter looking at him. He had been staring at rubble.

"Yes," he says softly. "It took seven years...but she forgave her."

A wry smile crosses his daughter's face. "Seven years, huh. And you're on...what, like one?"

He can't help it. He laughs.

"I think it's eighteen months if you include the pregnancy."

"Christ." She shakes her head. "I'll be in college."

"With any luck."

"I'll bet we're the only superhero family that hates each other."

"I wouldn't say that." He glances at the sky. "You saw what happened here tonight. Laptop created Top2."

It suddenly occurs to him that, less than ten minutes ago, he may have destroyed Laptop's creation. On his own.

Kirby's eyes go wide as he stares at the empty sky. Three years ago, Champion had thrown Top2 into a black hole. The machine had survived that. How the hell...?

"Dad?"

His daughter's head is cocked to one side.

"Right." He glances again at the sky, then shakes his head. "Top2 called Laptop its father. And it considered Device its grandfather."

He lets her figure it out. "So Device was Laptop's dad?"

He nods.

"Wow," she whispers. "So the first superhero's kid became a super-villain." She's still for a moment, and then her face twists in anguish.

"He must have hated his father."

Again, Kirby thinks of the funeral and Laptop weeping in the rain. "It's a little more complicated than that." He looks at his daughter. "It always gets more complicated."

He doesn't want to say what he has to say next, he knows it isn't fair, but...

"Mel...what we talked about tonight. About Michael. Honey, you can't ever tell...I mean, with your brother, you can't use—"

"Not even if I wanted to kill him." Her face is stone-white by the light of the moon. "Not even if I wanted him dead."

There's a long silence.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay, I guess you had to say it."

He desperately wants to say the right thing right now. He wants...

Suddenly, his daughter toes the ground and blushes in the moonlight. "I'm sorry I attacked you earlier on."

He assumes she's talking about when she left the house. "It's all right," he says quickly. "You had reason to be mad with me. We all say—"

"Not that." She laughs. A small little laugh. "I mean the puddles."

It takes him a second. He isn't as quick as she is. Then, suddenly, he remembers: stepping off the curb and plunging into ice water.

She laughs the little laugh. Looks up through her hair. "I was kind of mad."

He pictures himself, one of the most powerful people on the planet, tripping face first into a pool of water.

Suddenly, they can't stop laughing.

It lasts a long time. Father and daughter, doubled over in the moonlight and the rubble. Somewhere along the way for Kirby Walker, it turns into another sigh.

He looks down at his daughter. The quiet light of his heart.

"Are we...are we okay?"

He sees her hesitate. She's making the same choice he made earlier. On whether or not to shield him from the truth. These are the choices he has forced his fifteen-year-old daughter to make.

Finally, she says: "I don't know."

He nods. "That's fair. More than fair." A pause. "I am sorry, Mel. And I do love you."

"I love you too." Her face is a patchwork of shadows and light.

He reaches into his costume. Pulls out a ticket to a rock concert.

"I've still got this," he says, fingering the ticket. "It's, uh... it's late, but maybe we could catch the last set. Or...if you want, you could...you could go by yourself..."

She's standing ten feet away, on the crumbled remains of an abandoned silo. Her arms are once again wrapped around her torso as if she were bitterly cold.

"I think I'd just like to go home." She looks at her father. "Can we do that?"

And then his daughter, who tonight has proven to be one of the most powerful entities on the planet, bursts into tears.

He's at her side in a heartbeat.

"It's okay," he says, finally lying. "It's okay."

He holds her until the shaking stops, then gently cups a hand under her chin. "We can go home. It's okay."

She sniffles, once, and smiles. A wry, embarrassed little smile.

He kisses her gently on her brow. Sighs.

"Come on." He and his daughter begin to pick their way over rubble. He glances a final time at the moon.

"Your mother will be waiting." ❧

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Unlikely searchers:
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Jody Burns...wants to get back to shopping at the mall
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Father Peña's Last Dance

By Hannah Strom-Martin

Perhaps the puritans were right and dancing is, in fact, a tool of the devil.

Illustration by Tony Shasteen

THE WOMAN FINALLY APPROACHED ME ACROSS FROM LA RECOLETA Cemetery, following me to my table at Munich—the least tourist-infested café on Restaurant Row. I fancied her a Porteño. Her hair, red as lipstick, was wound in perfect, bushy coils about her face. Her clothes had come from the best shops. Her sunglasses made an insect of her, but also a movie star: Audrey Hepburn without the softness. As she approached, it seemed the mad sounds of Sunday tourism faded. Suddenly I was Mr. Bogart, watching my latest deadly siren approach through the wisps of cigarette smoke, the endless strains of tango music. The tango never stops in Buenos Aires. It goes on and on and we all dance to it in our time, helplessly drawn when fate initiates the cabezazo.

For as long as I knew her, she wore red. Not always a bright, traffic-light hue, though on that first day it was indeed the blood-colored flash of her linen dress which alerted me to her presence among the tombs. She wore pale pink once, like the stain left on butcher's wrap. Later she wore a sleek maroon sweater, fine and soft, covering her from throat to wrist against the encroaching gulf winds. Secretly, I called her Pandora, for hers was a red of unlocking. Of drive and of searching. You don't understand me yet, but you will.

"Mate´," she told the waitress, and sat across from me as if we were old friends. I knew she was a tourist, then. And American. But she had none of a tourist's awkwardness. She looked at me directly, her gaze discernable even through her enormous glasses. I folded my hands and smiled at her, but for a moment my old heart fluttered beneath its fat. It was noon. She could not have been one of them, yet she had their stillness. I imagined her ears beneath the gorgeous fall of hair perking like a listening dog's.

"Father Peña," she said.

Cautiously, I nodded.

"I'm sorry for haunting you," she said. "However, you of all people must know it takes a long time to trust."

"What can I do for you, señora?"

She smiled: red and nearly mocking.

"Have you seen the lights in the cemetery, Father?" she asked.

I grew dizzy for a moment. Had the record player skipped? No. People didn't use records anymore. The disc, then? Perhaps I'd simply aged ten years, finally lost my hearing along with my sanity. Sixty-four years in the city and no one had ever mentioned the lights. How could this woman, this outsider, know of them?

I nearly rose to go.

The woman's hard, hungry face softened abruptly into something like pity.

"I'm sorry," she said.

I laughed. Words failed.

"I'm Cole," she said. She extended her hand and her nails were also hard and red. "We have some friends in common."

"Friends?"

"Or enemies. But such things are not safe to speak of in the open."

I looked at my coffee, feeling suddenly like I was being sucked down into a whirlpool. When had I become so old, so frightened? Thirty years since Maria, and only now did I feel I was truly slipping into darkness. "Safe," I whispered. "No, señora. Not safe."

Her red-tipped hand descended on mine, her flesh warm and dry as sun-baked stone.

"I understand," she said.

ON THEIR WEDDING NIGHT COLE'S HUSBAND WAS TAKEN by a vampire. Cole and Ash were making love, the doors of their balcony open upon a summer night. The vampire drifted in from the terrace, a silent, slow-motion horror. Cole watched the gauzy curtains grow pregnant with its shape, wondering how the cloth could swell without a breeze. Then the vampire emerged. Before Cole could reconcile its floating figure, her new husband's unawareness, and the scream, half pleasure, half fear, building in her throat, the creature—a woman—descended on Ash's back.

Ash's eyes widened. The last sound Cole had of him was a gasp that might have been the sound his body made as he disappeared out the window. Cole tried to follow but the vampire had done something to the room. Trying to get out of bed, Cole fell into a black fog, only waking when the afternoon sun began to burn her skin the following day.

THOUGH HIS SHIRTS AND RAZOR, TROUSER SOCKS AND shoes remained in his conspicuously present suitcases, the police said Ash had run away. Their questions were ceaseless: Had he angered the government? Had he faked his own death? (This man who had spoken of children. This man who had picked out the plot where he and Cole would build their home.)

No, Cole said. No, no, no. Someone had been in the room that night. Ash had been kidnapped.

Later, when she had numbed herself with wine and marijuana, Cole remembered Ash's last business trip. From a hotel room in Buenos Aires he had written her a message on his computer:

"The city doesn't sleep until dawn. The clubs and bars only really begin to pump around 3 a.m. Our hotel is in La Recoleta—near the 'City of the Dead.' I roam there with Kevin all night while he tries to buy drinks for the girls on their mopeds.

"The women are stunning, but never as stunning as you, chula. One tried to get me to tango with her two nights ago. I passed her on to Kevin but she kept smiling at me."

Buenos Aires. It was the last stumbling block in his smoothly paved life. A girl. A cemetery. It didn't bode well.

"SO YOU CAME HERE," I SAID, THE CAFÉ AND AFTERNOON far behind us. Cole drank gin straight from a glass and chewed the ice. We sat on the sidewalk that served as my front lawn, resting on warm cement as the multicolored sidings of La Boca gleamed with deceptive cheer above us. After Maria I had thought to move somewhere festive. Yet the shadows were lengthening now. Mothers called children to

supper and the boys with their soccer balls vanished from the streets. I could smell meat and spices, hear the beef sizzling when the traffic lulled. The breeze came in from Canal Sur, stinking of oil. A salsa band began to tune in the distance, the trumpet mewling, lost in amongst the bright and dirty dwellings. Another colored night coming now. Another night.

"I've got a jealous nature," Cole said, blowing smoke from her cigarette. "I won't let another woman have him. Even if she is a vampire."

When I winced she quirked the side of her mouth.

"Shall I speak more softly?" she asked.

"Perhaps you should," I said. "No one speaks that word. Other people would think you were...." Why was it so hard? I had acquired more caution in my old age, instead of less.

"Loco?" Cole asked.

I spread my hands, nodded.

"Vampire," Cole whispered. "Wampyre. El Vampiro." She laughed in her low, rough way and blew the names of the demons out in clouds of nicotine. "I'm not afraid, Father," she said.

I sighed. "Perhaps you should be."

"At first I thought God was punishing me," I said, my voice distant to my own ears. "But that thing.... God would have been offended by its very existence."

Cole was the only person I'd ever met who knew about them. My fellow Porteños had to have seen things, but even in this city it was hard to acknowledge magic greater than the peace brought you by the Virgin's effigy, or the hell of too many nights in drink. This was still the modern world. Even Cole and I had only been able to believe after they stole our hearts: Cole's from a hotel room, mine from a courtyard café.

"Maria," Cole said. "Your priest friends told me about her. I think they miss you at that little church."

I laughed. My turn for gin now. We sat sweating in my flat, the bottle nearly empty between us. Passing cars provided the only light. I kept the ceiling fan on but would not touch the lamp. Cole seemed to understand. We sat and smoked, growing drunker. This is what lonely lovers do without their other half. It doesn't matter if two years have passed or twenty.

"You still wear the collar," Cole said.

I touched my throat: its white-starch band. She noticed so much, enough even to mark the stir in the air when one of them appeared. Is that how she had traced them, I wondered? To ask in churches until she found rumors and then stories and finally the local legends that brought her to me?

"I was told to retire," I said. I was drunk enough to sound bitter. "They wouldn't like it if they knew Father Peña still fancies himself a priest. But I never left them—they left me."

"You aren't a priest though, are you? Not anymore?"

"My religion is Maria. Father Adelmo and Father Sanchez—they knew it, even before she vanished. My heart had not been God's for some time."

"What happened, Father?" I could hardly see her in the dark. Just the outline of her hair.

"A girl of seventeen won the love of a priest twice her age." I said it calmly, as if I had told the story before. "On the night they would consummate their love the priest arrived late to a tango and a man in a black suit was standing with the girl. The dance was held outside amongst the garden lamps and torches, but the man cast no shadow. When I.... When the priest looked at the suited man, his eyes slid away, as if the place where the man stood was somehow unfit for human sight. The priest no longer believed in God, but he knew enough to recognize His opposite.

"The priest froze, not understanding how the devil could look like a mortal man. Even the girl, who had only begun to understand about God and Satan, seemed to sense the man in black was dangerous. She tried to pull away, but he pulled her close, into a dance.

"Something in their dancing woke the priest. He could sense something terrible had been set in motion.

"He pressed forward, pushing against the bodies of other dancers. It was difficult, because everyone who saw the dance of the girl and the man in black became awed. They crowded in around them, blocking the way. At last, frantic and afraid, the priest bulled through them, calling the girl's name. But as if God Himself had planned it, a fire pit lay directly in his path. Still calling her, he fell into the flames, scorching his hand. And as he lay writhing in the spilled coals, the man in black began to laugh.

"The priest knew then that he had been right: the man in black was a demon. Even now, his laughter was sucking out the priest's soul.

"There was nothing the priest could do. Before he could get to his feet, a dark wind rose. When it cleared, the man in black and the girl who carried the priest's heart were gone.

"Maria...."

I let my voice die, and finished my gin. I had never told the story before. I had raved to Father Sanchez of demons. I had given a sermon which frightened the faithful from the pews. But I had never sat as I did now, calmly, with another person, and simply talked.

"At first I thought God was punishing me," I said, my voice distant to my own ears. "But that thing.... God would have been offended by its very existence."

"I never had much use for God," Cole said. "What people call God is just love."

"It has been thirty years, señora," I said. "I haven't seen Maria again. Sometimes I don't know if I want to."

"You want to," Cole said. "Even if the worst is true and she and Ash are demons, living in hell, don't you at least want to save them?"

I laughed. "Me? A faithless priest? If you think to use me as a talisman, I'm afraid you've come to the wrong man."

Though no light shone on her, I could sense her smile.

"I didn't come looking for you because of your religion," she said. "I came looking for you because the Porteños say you can dance."

EVEN NOW, I DON'T KNOW HOW SHE FIGURED IT OUT: ABOUT the vampires and the tango. At times I still wondered if she were one of them, so preternatural were her instincts.

I HARDLY PAID ATTENTION TO WHERE SHE LED ME THE next morning, my head aching with gin. Too much for an old man. Too much. My dreams had been of fire and red-headed women.

The courtyard had been closed for years, hidden behind a wooden gate. Yellow and green paint still clung, stubborn and faded, to the insect-eaten boards. Pale weeds bent with a crackle as Cole pushed it open.

I followed her, my head down. Slowly the worn stones of the courtyard came into focus. My heart throbbed a warning even before I recognized the dilapidated remains of the café sagging on my right.

"No," I said. Brown leaves skittered across the yard, fetching up against the stone wall that circled the property. Mr. Pepe (he'd refused to let us call him "Señor") had built the barbeque pit into the wall so he could roast an endless supply of suckling pigs. Long before I fell in love with Maria, I came to Pepe's to eat and watch the dancing. The pit was full of leaves now. They dropped from a withered banyan, rustling as they fell.

Sweat ran wet fingers down my neck. The trees trapped the heat, coaxed the smell of mildew from the café's swollen walls. A strand of triangular plastic flags still hung above the courtyard where Mr. Pepe had strung them, their beer advertisements melted by thirty years of rain. They pointed down at the stones like fingers at a ghost.

"Why?" I said, rounding on Cole. My body shook.

Cole lit her second cigarette of the morning.

"Your friends like to tango," she said. "If we dance, they'll take an interest."

"Why here!" My voice drove unseen birds from the trees.

Cole pursed her hard, American mouth, redder than any red on God's earth, around her cigarette. I hated her, I thought. I hated her rigidity.

"It's reverse psychology, Father," she said. "If you can dance here, you'll be able to dance anywhere—even in front of your friends."

"Don't call them that!" I said. I approached her, clenching my fists in front of me. "They are no friends of mine, señora. They took her. Right under those flags. She stood right there—"

Abruptly, the ball of anger melted in my throat. Heat swept through me, wrapping aching coils about my heart. I dashed toward the place where Maria had stood, not knowing if the sickness that surged within me was bile or tears.

Then I was on my knees, the stones hurting even through my clumsy padding of flesh. I placed a hand against the stones, thinking perhaps this would be like touching her, across the years. Only stone met my fingertips. Cupped over my mouth, my other hand felt the watery release of an old man's tears.

"Well," Cole said behind me. "That's one hurdle down."

"CABEZAZO, RIGHT?"

We stood across from each other, on either side of the courtyard, my back to the café, hers to the bordering trees.

"Yes," I said, no longer resisting her. Whether through age or expenditure of grief, I felt oddly detached from this. She wanted me to teach her the tango so she could impress the vampires. What else was there to do on a Wednesday afternoon?

"The cabezazo," I said, continuing the lesson, "is the moment when the man and woman first make eye contact."

"Across a smoky room." She hoisted her cigarette. "Then what?"

"We approach one another. Only professionals really trouble with this part anymore. The laymen go right to the embrace."

"Let's do it right," she said. She sauntered toward me, holding her cigarette in her right hand, her wrist at a ninety-degree angle.

"No," I said. "No, no, no."

"What?" She smiled insolently. "Do we need to hire an accordion?"

A wave of anger disrupted my apathy. I hadn't felt angry in a long time and now I realized I had missed it: missed feeling anything, whatever the cause. When my blood stirred I did not shy away from it. The señora wanted a dance, did she? Father Peña could oblige her.

I stepped into anger.

"First," I said, drawing close enough to hiss the word in her face, "only whores carry this." I knocked the cigarette away with the back of my hand. Señora Cole began to protest but I drew her into the starting position: my offending hand in the small of her back, my other hand joined to hers above our waists.

"Hold on to me," I ordered. "No. Only our upper bodies touch. You lean into me and I guide you, like so." Her chest was flat and hard, but her back felt good beneath my hand. I showed her the basic step. In tango, the man leads, the woman must always be on the point of resistance. My left foot went forward while her right went back: El Paseo.

"Keep your upper body erect and pressed to mine," I said. "Our hearts always touch but never our feet. This is the Argentine Tango, señora."

She learned quickly, incorporating her desire to pull away into the dance. We progressed to La Cuinta, the rocking step, and La Chasse: the chase.

"Now," I told her, "backward eights!" and she complied. Slow, slow, quick, quick, slow. Slow, slow, quick, quick.

After an hour I could smell my own musk and her clean, soapy perfume. She wanted to keep going, her face flushed, two honest points of red pricking her cheeks.

"And, salida," I said, at last. I needed a drink of water. More gin. A beer.

Abruptly she fell into me, the tension in her neck relaxing, her strong, thin arms coming about my stoutness.

"Thank you, Father," she said. Her fingernails caught the short hairs at the back of my neck. "I knew you'd help me. You still dance like a young man."

"A young man is what they will want," I said. My anger had faded. My heart beat now with a strange peacefulness. "I don't know why you think I can bring you closer to them. They thrive on youth and beauty—you must know this if you've been close enough to see them dance."

"I've seen them," she said. "It isn't the youth they want, though."

"You mean they take old women with blue hair?"

"No," she said. "But you don't have to be young. They feed off emotion. They got you when you were going to bed Maria, right? And me on my wedding night, with Ash..." She trailed off a moment, raised her hand to her mouth as if anticipating the cigarette that wasn't there. "They'll get us," she said, quietly. "We have too much circling us—all that bad history. They'd be nuts not to go for it, don't you think?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, señora."

She released me and stepped away. I thought she would go for the purse she had left near the gate—for her smoking. But she hugged herself, rubbing her arms as though she were cold.

"The tango is like life," she said. "Struggle, struggle, struggle, and then—what did you call it?"

"Salida," I said. "The end."

She nodded. "Yeah," she said. "Salida."

That afternoon we went to La Recoleta and walked among the tombs. Cole ate a dulce de leche cone in ravenous little bites that made me question her age. I had placed her at thirty, yet now she seemed younger. Her step even bounced a little as she walked past the marble sarcophagi, immune to the flocks of tourists. She had more energy since we'd danced.

"You're younger than I think you are, aren't you?" I asked.

Her eyes narrowed above the rims of her sunglasses.

"I thought you were part of the generation who thinks those sorts of questions are rude," she said.

I waited, but she said no more. We walked in silence, enjoying the sun, staying clear of Evita's mausoleum. She was happy to be doing something, I decided. It explained her sudden lightness.

After I left my church, I had only felt alive when I followed one of them to an assignation. I took a pathetic thrill knowing I could recognize one, shadow it while it prowled, unaware. Such delights, however, faded when I began to notice them everywhere. After dark they haunted the restaurants, lurking, never eating. I'd seen one in a barber's shop once, reading a newspaper. Some had passed the little hall where, for a few months, I had taught the tango to old folks and tourists. They'd never liked my clientele. Their paths always ended with the abduction of another young beauty. Another Maria.

I thought of Cole's theory: Were they drawn to emotion somehow? To love? It could be. But why here, in this city? The vast streets and close-knit barrios were a beating heart upon which they preyed.

"The lights start about midnight," Cole said around the last bite of her cone.

I nodded. "You can see them from the street."

"We should come back after dinner," she said. "Hide until the guards leave."

"What? You mean watch from inside?"

She pushed the sunglasses down her nose. "You've never done that?"

I shook my head. I'd always seen the lights from a distance, circling the cemetery on foot. It had never occurred to me to get closer.

"Well," Cole said. "We can fix that. Come with me tonight. I'll take the first watch—Jesus!"

If she still had her cone she would have dropped it, bowled over by a pair of speckled cats who came charging from between the tombs. They vanished into the shadow of a large mausoleum, hissing and spitting as they fought.

"Tonight," Cole said, firmly, straightening her skirt.

When her back was turned, I crossed myself.

Nothing happened that night, save that she grew even younger to me. We took turns sleeping, crammed into a nook of broken stone where the backside of an enormous tomb had crumbled. No watchmen came near. My only company as I fell asleep, too tired to care if my cheek pressed into her hard young shoulder, was the distant howling of cats.

In the middle of the night I jolted awake. Cole put her hand on my shoulder and together we watched the silver-blue light bloom over La Recoleta. Beyond the boundaries of the cemetery the nightlife would carry on, the neon glare masking the glow to the casual eye, but I heard no motorcycles rev, no horns or voices, not a single strain of music. The light hummed, casting moon-colored shadows on the cemetery paths.

"God," I said.

Cole nodded. I could smell the new-washed sweetness of the sweatshirt she had used as a pillow and wanted suddenly to burrow into it. Her grip tightened on my shoulder.

"I want to go to them," she whispered. "But we aren't ready. Have you ever thought that they might be different when they're at home?"

I shook my head. They were terrible enough when they roamed the streets, pretending to be human.

"Not ready," Cole said again. "Not yet. But we will be."

I remember her at our first dance: tight mouthed, determined not to falter. Her dress was scarlet, a color far different from simple red. How deeply the vanished Ash must have loved her.

Nervously, we waited for the evening to begin. My burned hand tingled, my dreams the night before all of fire. Cole crossed her arms under her small, apple-like breasts, watching as the unholy materialized among the tables.

It had been years since I'd paid attention to the individual aspects of a vampire. At first I had scanned their ranks, looking for Maria. When she never appeared the rest of them took on a kind of uniformity. Male or female, all were slender, all beautiful, all surrounded by subtle darkness. You would mistake them for Porteños if your eyes didn't slip across them when you tried to stare.

Five sat in the crowd that night: three women, two men. I recognized a cruel-faced boy who had only appeared in the last decade. The others were strangers. Their ranks kept growing, new faces every year. They were making their own Porteños now: a whole city, perhaps, lying beneath our feet. Did Maria live there too—hidden away all these years? She would no longer be the girl in the modest white dress, but something unholy and refined.

The music began. In the clubs, couples are expected to dance with strangers. After the first dance, Cole and I would be expected to switch partners. We had one chance. We waited for our song.

It came at last with accordion and bass: an Argentine Tango. No one bothered with the slow seduction of the Cabezazo anymore, so we took to the floor, beginning our routine with the Entrada.

I had started to dance on my slow fall from the priesthood, sneaking to Mr. Pepe's during the week. Cole had taken ballet and yoga. The greatest trick we could pull off—her with her inexperience, I with my age, was the Volcada—the falling step. Even then, it was only my years which made the feat memorable, for I looked incapable of performing it.

Cole danced stiffly at first, her teeth set. As she began her first firuletes—a small kick with her back foot as she turned, a quick hook to my leg before going into her backward eights—the vampires perked up. Over the heads of the other dancers I saw them rise, drifting toward one another. Their heads tossed back and forth, scanning the crowd.

"Shit," Cole whispered. She grew even stiffer, faltering. I fought the urge to run. I could see them coming, their sleek, gleaming heads bobbing as they waded toward us.

"Shit!" Cole said again. It would all be for nothing if she lost heart now.

I could think of one thing to do.

"Surrender," I whispered. I pressed, my leg on hers, driving her deeper into the crowd. She resisted. Her eyes flashed to mine:

Are you crazy, old man?

"Surrender," I said. Another push. "Dance."

At last, she did.

I remember the smoke of that night. The smell of her fear. Other couples were prettier, evenly matched, young. None danced more earnestly. None as if their heart and soul hung in the balance. A sheen of sweat bejeweled Cole's forehead, snaring wisps of red hair. For the first time I thought her beautiful. For the first time we moved with a single purpose, no longer at odds— Porteño and American, man and woman. We moved like two determined martyrs, knowing the danger and plunging ahead to the end: Volcada. The fall.

Salida.

When the music stopped, the laughter took me by surprise. The couples stood about, applauding one another, some already drifting back to their tables. Yet the room pulsed with raucous laughter. Cole shuddered, clambering up from our finishing pose.

Two vampires stood beside us: a man and a woman. They had been there all along.

I realized their laughter was in my head. "Touching!" the female said. "How lost and tragic you are!" She bent toward me and sniffed, once, like an animal. The points of her teeth flashed.

"Sad, sad," said the male. "As if we would take such as you."

"You're here now, aren't you?" I flinched as Cole spoke. She stepped away from me, straight-backed and angry, her teeth very white as she matched the woman's aggressive expression. "I know who you are, puta," she said. "I recognize your disgusting hair."

The female smiled too widely for humanity. "Ash's wife," she said.

Cole nodded. "Tell me where he is."

"I will tell you nothing, chula. Only the worthy may speak to us." Abruptly she turned to me: a movement so fast I was shocked to find her face in mine.

"Ave Maria, Father," she whispered, bringing sharp-tipped nails to brush my cheek. The air she stirred smelled of decay. Her touch felt like the wriggling of a grave worm. I gagged.

"No!" I said. Another tango was beginning, people flocking to the floor, yet they all veered away from us, sensing not to come near. A woman knocked against me, then slipped away as if I'd passed right through her.

"I'm going to kill you," Cole said.

The vampires laughed. Oh, such passion! Were they speaking, or were their voices in my head again?

"I won't live in a world with you in it." Cole said. "One of us is going to die."

We shall see.

Their scorn filled my head, driving out their laughter. A familiar black mist descended.

Maria, I thought. Maria.

The image of Cole's red stiletto followed me into a place of darkness and fire.

Cole brought a single bag with her to Argentina. The night of our humiliation I woke on my couch to find her rummaging in the corner. From the bag, she took something I had only seen in monster movies at the Sunday matinee.

"Show me again," she said.

She'd dragged me back to Mr. Pepe's, demanding more lessons. She had another plan.

"No," I said. "Damn you. It's over."

"I don't accept that."

"They won't take us. Besides: Why would you go there, knowing he's one of them? You will die horribly or else end up the same!"

"I love him, Father," Cole said. "I'm going to save him. Don't you need to save her? Are you just going to give up now—thirty years later—and never find Maria?"

I was livid. "How dare you speak her name?" I said. "You know nothing of us. Nothing! I wake up in the night, sweating because she is gone. In my dreams I am consumed by the fires of hell!"

"You don't believe in hell!" Cole screamed at me. "You don't believe in God, or even love! You only believe in your own fear! Coward!"

I hit her. She tripped backward in her flame-red heels, holding a hand to her cheek. For a moment, we faced each other. Then something kindled in her eyes. She came back at me, her fingernails splayed like talons.

"You've betrayed her!" she shrieked. "You stupid man! You've betrayed us all! My Ash! My husband! Maria!"

We fought, dancing back and forth across the stones. Her nails clung to my shirt, jerking me. My feeble bulk strained against her. Late August heat blew around us and it began to rain. Soon we were both wet and exhausted. She slapped at me and I fought her off, trying to ignore the tears which streamed down her face, smearing her makeup, revealing how frightened and pale she really was.

Eventually she collapsed on my chest, sobbing. The hands she had shaken me with clung fast to keep herself from falling.

My heart broke so suddenly I feared a stroke. But no. My heart still beat. But it ached now. A deeper ache than I had ever known.

We slipped down upon the rain-slicked stones, holding one another like children. The names of our lovers fell from our lips and we embraced fiercely, trying not to let the world take us, the storm spin us up into the sky.

Eventually the rain stopped. A muggy sun emerged, making the stones steam. I rested my old, foolish head on hers and patted her bedraggled hair.

"Do you ever think," she said, "that the flames in your dreams aren't really from hell? That maybe they're simply the love you never had, burning you from the inside?"

When I failed to respond she rested her head on my shoulder.

"Please help me, Father," she said. "I don't want to burn."

"All right," I said. "All right."

On that last day, some months later, we hid in La Recoleta until the silver light bloomed over the tops of the graves. Then we ventured forth into the true City of the Dead.

Between tangos, Cole had theorized that we could simply follow the light to its source. We were only two mortals, after all. Why would they stop us?

We came to the center of the cemetery, where the monuments towered above us like great houses. Stone angels wept into fountains. A rose window glittered in the corpse-light. Here was the source: blinding. Immense. We approached resolutely. Cole had her bag over one arm.

I had resigned myself to whatever fate awaited me. I very much doubted we would walk away from this. They would drain us, leave us stranded on the shores of death, or else resurrect us to their soulless life. I seldom thought of this. Cole took up my days. In six months I hadn't been alone for more than a few hours at a time.

We stood a moment, contemplating the tomb, just visible beyond the glaring light. A watchman, had he passed, might have seen an unexplained blur as we shifted in place. We were invisible now. I knew it as I knew vampires.

"So this is the mouth of hell," I said.

Cole laughed. Her hand brushed mine.

"Thank you, Father," she said.

I nodded.

We stepped into the light.

A great basalt tomb yawned before us, a long staircase descending into the dark.

"Listen," Cole whispered.

From the mouth came the high-pitched whine of a violin. Had I never seen a vampire, I would have known a dead man sawed those strings.

"Come on," Cole said. She gripped the strap of her bag with one hand and pulled me after with the other. Before I lost sight of her in the darkness, she set her jaw, light sparking in her eyes. I wondered where the source of that light was. The flash had been the color of flame.

Stone surrounded us. We stumbled downward, following the music. The tomb stank of must here. Iron. Old bones. Other tunnels crossed ours. Other staircases branched away. The music lay straight ahead, always.

Slowly, a light grew, illuminating green veins in the ancient stone. I grit my teeth, swallowing as we passed, imbedded in the stone itself, the skulls of men and women interred here in forgotten times.

We came to a landing with a corroding granite balustrade. A great torch-lit chamber lay below us, swarming with figures. On the other side, directly facing us, a labyrinth of cloisters, niches, and stairways branched and tunneled across an endless expanse of stone.

"Ant hive," Cole whispered.

Helplessly, I tiptoed to the balustrade, seduced by the warren of strange shapes and stairs which led nowhere. The music swelled around us, majestic and insane, drifting up from the chamber. The dark-clad bodies, writhing and tossing beneath me, cast no shadows, their actions stark in the light of the torches they had set on all sides of their hall.

Not a hive, I thought. A kingdom.

I started as Cole touched me.

"Come on," she said. "I've found a way down."

A set of craggy steps let us in at the back of the hall. The vampires remained oblivious as Cole and I clambered down. I hardly had the sense to feel afraid anymore, so intent was I on the details of their strange dwelling. Broken statues of the Virgin lay in a pile beneath a fallen arch. Cole's high heel caught in the eye-socket of a skull.

We made it halfway across the chamber before they noticed us. A man bending his partner over in a volcada, bared his teeth at us. The couple next to him stopped in the middle of la chasse. One by one they all grew still. The hellish fantasia died. Only the fires stirred.

You are unworthy, they told us, voices cold within my mind. Why have you come?

Cole stepped forward.

"Ash Marcus," she told them. "You will give him back to me."

As one, they smiled. Lips slid audibly across teeth.

The unworthy are not permitted here.

"We are not unworthy," Cole said.

Laughter. This time, they spoke with their minds but laughed with their mouths. I broke into a cold sweat as a waft of rotting breath swept over me. Cole had taken my hand and her grip was steel.

"Let us dance!" she shouted over them. "Kill us if we displease you!"

The laughter ceased as they pondered. Then their shoulders relaxed. The women slumped, leaning against their partners. Some of the men nodded in tandem.

Proceed.

"Music," Cole said. "A Tango Argentine."

An unseen band swept bows across strings and we began.

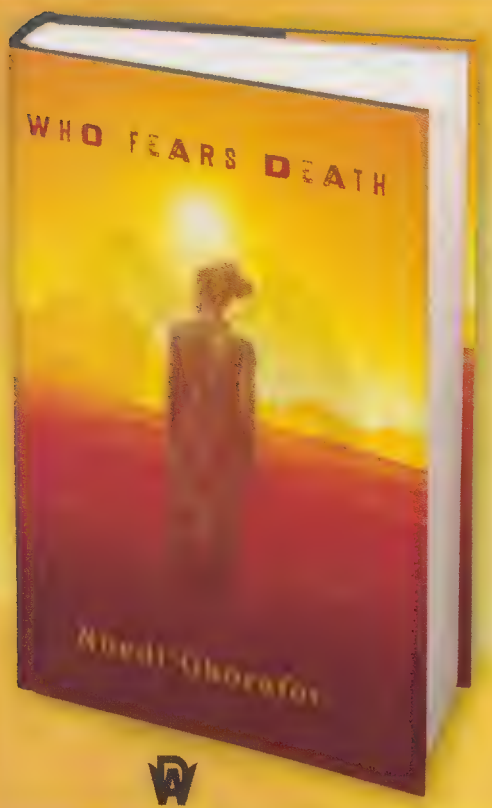
Months ago, we had decided it was no longer enough to simply dance. If Cole was to rescue Ash, we would have to live our trials.

So our tango was not sophisticated or soft or beautiful. I hadn't even been able to practice all the firuletes because I knew I could only give most of them once. What we lacked in refinement, we made up for in terror.

This was a tense dance, but isn't it always? The tango is life, they say. And life is a pull and withdrawal, a tug and a rebound. Life, lived correctly, is love. So Cole and I tried to live in the music. We tried to make our last act in this or any world, one of love.

At some point, I sensed the pricking of vampiric ears, the rustle of their clothing as we drew them in. The sounds unnerved me, filling me with images of rot. But it wasn't them I remembered: the sense of bodies closing in around me. I remembered Cole: her face, bone-white and desperate, but so brave.

I knelt, let her kick a leg over my head before grabbing her ankle. Flesh had never felt so real to me. Her skin burned through her stockings, burrowed into my sweating palms.



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When we clung or fell or rocked in place, our fingernails left dents in one another's flesh. She tore my shirt, circling me, slashing with her nails as she relived her loss. I could hardly contain my sob as my hands ran down her body, relating how I had loved in my youth. Across the uneven floor, strewn with the bones of fools, we fought and danced and loved back and forth. And finished: my head pressed to her belly as the strings swept to a halt.

"I love you," I whispered. The words simply fell out of me. Her body pulsed against my cheek, her hand caught painfully in my thin hair. In this place of death, I felt more alive than I had in thirty years.

"It's all right," she said. "Get up, Father."

I rose, aching all over. I had sacrificed the last of my elasticity for her. I had knelt on that floor an old man. I rose decrepit.

Cole placed her hands on my shoulders, squeezing as she looked at me. Her face glowed, flushed and beaded with sweat. I knew we had made a terrible mistake coming here. Yet only here could I have realized: what I had whispered to her belly was true.

"Cole," I said. Strange bodies were pressing near, heated and barely restrained. Their breath dragged at us, sucking bits of us away.

"It's all right," she said again. A tear coursed down her cheek, moving quickly as it merged with her sweat. "He's coming now," she said. "We won."

"What?" I wanted her to keep looking at me. I would never live if she looked away: this light of love on her face. This euphoria. Her whole body trembled: alive. Alive.

But not for me.

Ash's wife. The crowd, hovering around us, parted ranks. From a Moorish arch, three figures approached. I recognized the woman who led them.

"Cole," I whispered. The heat of our dancing faded rapidly, my heartbeat speeding from exertion to fear. I tried to hold on as she pulled away, heading for the woman. She'd taken the object from her bag.

A man followed the vampire woman, and a smaller figure, but I had no time for them. The man, tall and pale, his dark hair slicked to the side, was beautiful as a sculpture. I was sure he had been even more glorious when he was alive.

"Cole!" I cried, trotting painfully after her. She gave no heed, unaware of anyone but herself and the woman. And Ash.

"Cole," the vampire mocked. She held up her hand and Cole froze, grimacing.

"No, Cole! No!" I forced myself to reach her, tugged at her arm. "It isn't him anymore," I said. "It isn't him. Don't do this."

"I said I would kill you," Cole told the woman. "I meant it."

"Maybe you should listen to your friend," the woman said. "Ash is ours now. Once we have taken someone, they are ours forever. Isn't that right, Father?"

As she spoke, the little figure behind her came forward. A dirty veil covered its face—swath after swath of yellowed net. The bridal gown might have been fashionable in my youth.

I trembled, knowing somehow what would happen. Then the vampire flipped the veil aside and I saw a face I had not seen in thirty years.

Earth bit my knees. I did not remember falling. The vampire led Maria toward me and she came with the tentative steps of a girl at her first communion. Her face was blank and beautiful and cold, her dark, liquid eyes taking me in without recognition.

As I bent beneath my grief, the vampire moved toward Cole.

"You see?" she said. "She is ours. Ash is ours. There is nothing you can do."

"There are ways," Cole said again.

I looked up just in time to see her stab the object from her purse into the woman's empty heart.

A gasp went through the hall. The vampire stumbled back almost comically, examining the stake in her breast with an expression of disbelief. Black blood coursed between her breasts, slicking the earth as she wavered and fell.

"You are unworthy of my husband," Cole told her. "And of me." While the vampire struggled to die, Cole stepped over her and approached the still, watchful figure of Ash. She placed her hands on either side of his face.

"No," I groaned. For I knew what she would do. It was what I longed to do as Maria stood over me in her sweet, corrupted beauty. How easy to beg the one you love to save you. For thirty years I had wanted Maria to come back from hell and end mine. I had put such trust in love, ascribed more power to it than to that of God. But love was dead now. It stood over me, reeking of decay.

"Cole!" I scrambled to my feet, away from the slight form of the bride who I had once wanted more than salvation or breath. Cole stood murmuring to Ash, rubbing her radiant hair against his neck. They welcomed me with a calm look. His fingers wound greedily in her hair.

"No, Cole," I begged her. "Don't do this. Don't let him make you like them."

She smiled sadly. "This is what I came for, Father. For this very thing." Something rustled behind me. White skirts trailing on the earthen floor. I wouldn't look.

"You found Maria," Cole said.

"It isn't her."

"I know. Your love is different from mine. I'm not like you, Father. I want to be where Ash is. To be at his side whatever form he takes."

"Even death?"

"What else is life without love?" That light was in her eyes again—the gleam with no source. This had been her plan, I realized. The whole time. Every moment.

"Cole," I said, forcing myself to sound reasonable, "come with me now. You were meant to be alive—to love in the sunlight."

"This is the purest form of love I know," she said. "And someone must stay here, Father. Or they'll never let you go."

As she spoke I felt a prickling at my back. They were behind me. The entire hall. One of their own was dead and they were filled with hunger, and rage.

"I've fallen in love with you, señora," I said, my heart dropping away from me.

"I know. That is why I won't let them hurt you. But you must get out, Father. Go far away." Abruptly she addressed the hall: "Do you hear me? Let the father go. He is unworthy of this hall—you shall not sully yourself with him!" A murmur greeted her words. I cannot say if it was agreement. Their energy was like nothing human or animal, and she had made herself its center.

"Go now," she said. She touched my cheek, and I seized her fingers, kissing them.

"Señora, please!"

"The dance is over, Father," she said. She dropped my hand, caressing Ash's gleaming face. As she offered up her long, white neck, I bolted. The crowd, held back for so long, broke and rushed past me like a flood.

I RAN. BACK TO THE OTHER END OF THE CHAMBER. Back UP the stairs. Back into the tunnel. I fled the roar of voices. I fled the blistering Argentine Tango that burst suddenly to life at my back, mocking everything Cole and I had shared. My breath shuddered in and out, phlegm creeping up my throat. My bones felt like they would tear away from one another as I forced myself toward the surface.

Just once, before I came to the mouth of the tomb, I thought I heard the scrape of slippers on stone, the whisper of a woman's elaborate train. But I forced myself to grow deaf, to block out the cries and moans and tipsy drum-beats which emanated from the depths of that subterranean hell.

When I broke from the tomb, tumbling out into a morning terrible and wondrous in its blue-skied beauty, my tears were flowing uncontrollably, blinding me as sobs wracked my breast.

I fell, scrabbling at the dusty path between the mausoleums, breathing sweet air, beside myself with feelings, horrible and otherwise, which I am not sure I have resolved within myself even to this day.

I knew only two things for certain as I lay on the path, the sun warming me back from what seemed an eternity of chill: my name was Antonio Peña and I would never dance the tango again.

Salida. ❧

Hannah Strom-Martin's fiction has appeared in *On Spec, Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* and the anthology *Amazons: Sexy Tales of Strong Women.* She is a frequent contributor to *Strange Horizons* on line magazine (www.strangehorizons.com) and blogs sporadically on LiveJournal (http://v-verticordia.livejournal.com/). She lives in California with her husband, Tony, and a bunch of cats—all inevitably named after characters from The Lord of the Rings and A Song of Ice and Fire. She can't tango, but occasionally sings opera.

Seagull Girl's Butterfly Tongue

by Sara Genge

Sometimes we don't know what we want. Sometimes we do, but are left no choice.

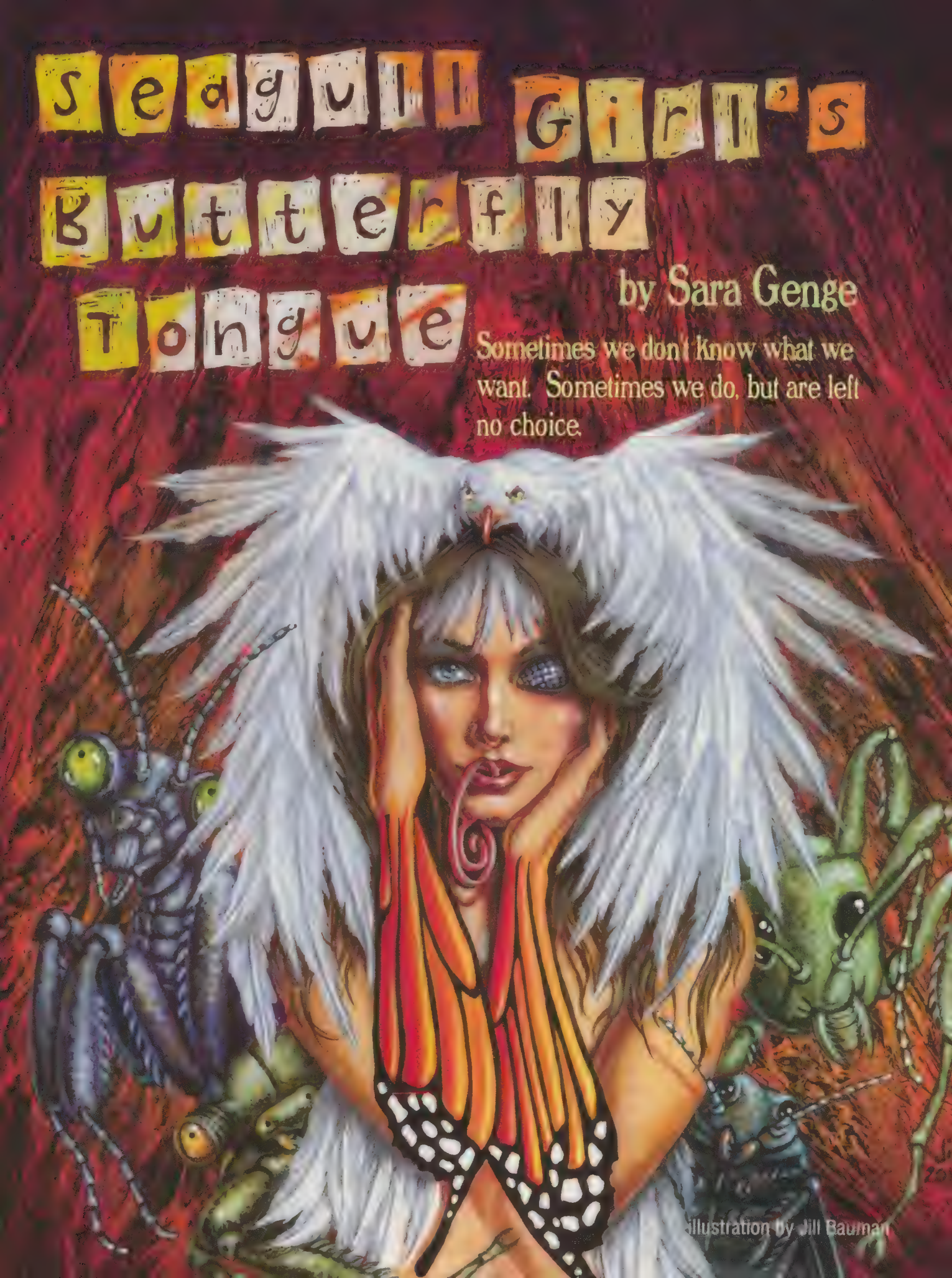

Illustration by Jill Bauman

Michael was ready for the zombies. As ready as anyone could be to face a horde of inhuman drones. Ready to die.

They had infiltrated the networks early in the war, so Michael didn't bother with the radio, knowing all he'd find there was zombie agit-prop about being one with Mother Nature and using the Communal Mind—the usual crap. He huddled in his basement, expecting them to bust the door down or come creeping through the ventilation ducts at any moment.

He kept the Taurus PT-911 ready, safety off, and he didn't sleep.

When they did come, they crawled in under the door, one body part at a time, letting Michael pick them off bit by bit. He shot them, but you know how it is with zombies. You hit them in the arm and their flesh dissolves into a cloud of flies, which zoom around the room before those pheromones call them back. In the meantime, the zombie keeps coming at you, arm or no arm.

Shooting them in the head slows them down more, but never enough.

"Mike," they groaned, opening mouths like caves and showing him the butterflies inside, monarch tongues airy and bright.

"We love you, Mike."

He unloaded the rest of the cartridge and scuttled back. His heel hit the wall.

"I think we're scaring him," said a woman in the back. The rest stopped mid-lurch, trying to wrap their minds around her startling burst of individuality and human insight.

"Why doesn't he love us?" cawed the biggest one. He wore a crow for a face and was using its voice.

"He's not ready for us," she said. "He doesn't know how good it feels to be part of the cure instead of the disease." A seagull sat on her head, or rather, was part of her head, and its wings fell to the sides of her face, framing her in a feathery mane that was almost as white as Michael's. Two beetles stared out from the pits of her eyes and the cicadas of her fingers chirped with each gesture from her hands. There were squeaks, groans, and warbles coming from her person. She was noise impersonate, but she stood at the center of the commotion with poise, letting her hands, fingers, hairs scuttle and fly about as they would, but keeping a center of gravity for them to return to.

"Think of birds, Mike. I know you've been hiding a long time, but surely you haven't forgotten the birds. Remember them flying in formation? A flock of birds is more than the sum of its parts. It is a separate entity, a whole new creature. Each bird knows that it is part of something bigger than itself, and when it dies, each bird smiles knowing that the flock keeps on without it."

Michael took aim and fired, but her head dispersed before the bullet could impact. He saw how she was inside: a collection of lesser brains pulling together in gross imitation of a Human being. She reassembled a couple steps closer. The other zombies stepped back.

"Mike," she whispered. "The higher the life form, the harder it is for them to give up their individuality. Take my word, Mike, it is worth the price. You do not have to be alone."

He threw a book at her; he did not want to waste more bullets.

She sighed with her whole body: the creatures heaved outward and contracted, exhaling a puff of air that smelled of wet earth, fermenting fruit, and glycolysis.

"He's not ready," she said, and the others groaned and quivered as they opened the door, streamed down the corridor, and clambered out of the basement.

"You can't be alone forever, Mike. No man is an island."

Michael watched them go, took a swig from his water can, and reloaded the Taurus.

"Do you know that the brain size of an animal is inversely proportional to its willingness to be zombified?" the arm said.

There was a rustle in a corner. Michael spun around and aimed but it was only an arm. He hadn't realized the zombies had left it behind. A beak punched out of the armpit and squeaked to clear its throat.

"Do you know that the brain size of an animal is inversely proportional to its willingness to be zombified?" the arm said.

"I wonder why," Michael said, shoving the gun into the back of his trousers. He opened a can of beans and spooned them into his mouth. Cold. The zombies had cut power to the basement.

"Well, it's harder for higher IQ animals," the arm continued. Michael had noticed zombies were oblivious to sarcasm. Besides, the arm was small and couldn't contain much brainpower. "Smaller animals immediately see the benefits of zombification. It's an obvious step up for them. We do understand, Mike, that this is hard for you, but six billion people have taken this last evolutionary step and every single one is happy with the change."

Michael thought of the zombifications he'd seen. They didn't seem like a step up for him. The insects came first, drilling their way into the flesh, making way for larger species. They called it "terraforming." It wasn't supposed to hurt, but if he closed his eyes he could still hear the screaming of the new zombies as their flesh was bitten and digested, their brains sacked and their consciousness spread among all the creatures in their bodies.

Michael kicked the arm across the room and it landed against the wall with a thud.

"Ouch," it said. "You do realize I let you do that, right? I could have dissolved under your foot, but I thought you needed to let off some steam."

Michael wasn't so sure: his kick had shaken up the arm quite a bit and dislodged flesh from bone. The arm was still more of a human corpse than an actual zombie, and until its transformation was complete, it couldn't disperse when attacked. Underneath all the flies and bugs, there was still human flesh and Michael could kick that to his heart's content.

THE ZOMBIES CAME BACK, OR RATHER, THEY NEVER LEFT. Michael heard them setting up camp behind his door, the squeaks and chirps they directed at each other, the occasional human word. For people who enjoyed telepathic communication, they sure made a hell of a lot of noise.

"Mike? Mike? Are you awake?"

Michael jolted awake, gun ready.

"Always," he growled. He'd been dreaming of summers in the Nation, of playing stickball as a child. Except none of it had happened. His parents had tried too hard to assimilate into the American dream. Michael had only played ball once, in college, during a Cherokee revival phase he'd gone through. That had never been his world; he was surprised it came out now. He was almost seventy. It had been years since he'd thought about it.

"Oh. That must be uncomfortable," Seagull Girl said. Michael had no doubt that it was her.

"I wonder who is to blame."

Seagull Girl sighed.

"We can't let off, Mike. I need to make you understand—"

"I is a curious word for a zombie to be using," Michael said.

"Don't be difficult. We've got better things to do than sit in the dark. Listen, I know you're not ready to transform yet. You have my word—our word—that we won't try to take you by force. I propose a truce. We won't come in without permission and in exchange, you promise to talk to us every day. We're sure we can make you see reason."

Michael took a deep breath. He was glad Emma had died before seeing this.

"The arm has to go."

"We need eyes in there, Mike!"

"Not the arm, I can't stand that fucking arm!"

"A part of me then, a strand of my hair, a butterfly from my tongue..."

Michael thought of the centipedes crawling underneath her seagull. "A butterfly, then."

The arm scuttled over to the door and let itself out.

A butterfly replaced it. The non-functioning refrigerator served as a bust of Pallas for the insect to perch on and look down on Michael.

THE FIRST ZOMBIE ARRIVED A WHILE LATER. AT FIRST, Michael didn't notice the visitor. He streamed in, in an antline, which amalgamated into larger creatures: cockroaches, centipedes, bees. Nothing bigger than a tarantula or complex like a higher animal. Michael guessed he was old, a zombie who had volunteered for the procedure at the beginning and had evolved until it had no use for mammals or anything remotely human.

The zombie lifted a hand in greeting and spilt himself on the couch.

"Hi, Mike." Jesus bugs skimmed its surface and two silkworms arched over eyes that fixed Michael in a benign stare.

Michael cradled the Taurus on his lap.

"How are you doing? Do you have enough food?"

Michael shook his head.

"Entertainment? I can bring you some novels from your library upstairs. They'll fit right under the door."

"No," he croaked.

"Refusing the books is irrational. You'll go insane cooped up all on your own," the zombie said.

Michael glared at the being and tried not to glance at the butterfly. He hadn't seen it move since it perched there. Maybe it was dead. Were zombie parts mortal? It stood to reason. Zombie biology was crazy, but they were organic creatures and entropy must take its toll. Maybe some of the Zap 'Em All that Emma had hoarded over the years would do the trick. But it probably wouldn't. Zombies could lose a significant percentage of their bodies and stay alive.

"It's hard for me talking to you," the zombie said. "I didn't want to, I prefer nonverbal communication now. But I owed it to the others. They are committed to this project. They're committed to you and your transformation. They've sacrificed for you, so that you'd come to us willingly. We care."

"I've seen how you care. The forced zombifications: I've seen them. The screaming... Children. Old People. I know you. I know your tricks; I know what you do..." He stopped. Talking never changed a zombie's mind.

"The early days were chaotic and there were mistakes. Accidents. We don't do that any more. We've gotten better at controlling the pain and consent is now required. We apologize for the suffering we've caused you; you should never have had to witness a zombification without having the process explained to you."

"Oh, so now it's my fault for not understanding the process. You can talk until you kill those butterflies in your

"It's hard for me talking to you," the zombie said. "I didn't want to, I prefer nonverbal communication now. But I owed it to the others...They're committed to you and your transformation."

mouth. I'm not letting go of this—" he patted the PT "—and I'm not consenting to nothing."

From then on, they left the door open. Seagull Girl insisted. It was for his own protection, she said. They wanted to make sure they could get into the room quickly and fully assembled in case Michael tried to hurt himself.

They weren't so far off the mark. The zombies scuttling in the corridor set his teeth on edge, but he was comforted by the thought that they couldn't stop him from killing himself if he chose to try. The Taurus stayed in his hand, day and night. He'd be dead long before the first flies arrived, and everyone knew you couldn't zombify a corpse. There had to be conscious thought during the transition: otherwise, cognitive patterns didn't carry to the next life.

He had thought he didn't sleep before. Well, he sure didn't now. There was still no power in the basement. From seven p.m. on, he couldn't see his hand in front of him. The darkness didn't stop the zombies; their shuffle-scuffle, chirp-and-moan carried on throughout the night.

He counted the days and tried to remember how much time had passed between this and that. There were the months between the zombie outbreak and the defeat of the government, but he didn't bother with those, thinking they might be written down somewhere. Then, the 206 days hiding before they found him. Then two days until the Chat with that Old Zombie. The open-door days came afterwards, the lack of sleep. It was on the third open-door day that Michael saw Seagull Girl copulating with another zombie.

At first he thought he was dreaming. He sat upright, hit the PT-911 against his thigh—the usual things he did to stay awake. Seagull Girl and an anonymous zombie were standing close together, swaying gently to the buzz of their inhabiting creatures. They seemed to be talking, and that was strange. Telepathy made face-to-face conversation irrelevant. They were almost touching and Michael caught himself holding his breath.

Seagull Girl leaned forward and sniffed the other zombie where his neck should have been. A moth left his shoulder and perched on her head. She smiled, her mouth melting at the corners. Her beetle eyes popped out of their sockets, scuttled down her body, and landed on the floor with a couple of plops which echoed down the corridor. Every other being in their bodies was quiet. Mike hadn't heard such silence since the zombies arrived.

They melted in a whoosh. Raining bugs blackened the linoleum and scattered through the corridor. There were ants and centipedes, slugs, wasps, mantises, and those ever-present spiders. In the middle of the sea of insects, a seagull preened, bobbing up and down among the swirling creatures. The bugs moved in a flurry of competing trajectories, each animal clearly headed somewhere—

In minutes, it was over. Two bodies began forming. Seagull Girl's seagull landed back on her head. Horizontal stick insects replaced the beetles of her eyes. She was recognizable even though all her pieces were different. The guy next to her was as indistinct and zombie-ish as before. They'd swapped parts. Mike wondered if they'd also swapped brains.

Seagull Girl turned to him. Half a dozen ladybugs gathered on each cheek. The meaning was unmistakable: she was blushing. She skipped over to the doorway and called back a couple of deer ticks which had crawled into his room.

"Sorry about that, didn't mean to break our pact. Got a bit excited; you know how it is," she giggled and they left.

She had wanted him to see that.

The sun was setting. It'd be another dark night.

"You've been here for a while, haven't you? Months! This is your house, isn't it? Didn't you try to escape? You survived the Sweep!"

Michael felt like Seagull Girl's pet project. She no longer insisted he transform. The basement had been remodelled as a private living space for Michael's kids when they'd been teenagers and Seagull Girl made good use of the old ping-pong table, playing both sides by pitting parts of her body against each other. She chatted and chirped and seemed incapable of sitting still.

On the fifth open-door day, he had his electricity back. He didn't ask, but he was sure she'd done it.

The next day, he opened his eyes and saw her staring at him with a gap in the middle of her face. It took him a while to piece the collage together and realize she was open-mouthed with surprise, awe, fascination—or all three. Or maybe she was just missing some parts.

"I did some research," she said. "You've been here for a while, haven't you? Months! This is your house, isn't it? Didn't you try to escape? You survived the Sweep!"

"Seven months until you found me. I did try to outrun the Sweep like everyone else. Got as far as Chicago. The boys and their families went on; I was too tired. Couldn't have that on my conscience, them slowing down for me. I doubled back. Lay low. Shot some game in the beginning."

"We didn't know anyone had survived the Sweep. Without transforming, that is. The other stragglers are in isolated parts of the world, areas that were never Swept in the first place. We're just about done with Polynesia now. The Ozarks were a pain, and we're pretty sure we haven't cleaned out Finland. But a genuine American in a Wisconsin suburb..." She had the decency to shut up. Mike closed his eyes. Just resting.

"You're Cherokee. You should understand about merging with Nature—"

"Oh, don't you give me that shit! Don't you dare give me that shit. What are you, some New Age junkie?" He stood up.

"I see nothing wrong with being spiritual..."

"That's just it. Isn't it? You have this twisted idea in your head about what is natural, what is good. What would you know, you crazed aberration? You've destroyed every species, every ecosystem." He paced; considered putting a bullet through her head just to see what would happen. But it was a waste of a good bullet. He needed them. Or at least, he needed the last one.

"Then explain! I want to understand. What is life to you? What does it feel like? You have memories buried in your head that will die if we don't take them!" She stood up and he saw that her feathers were shaking. Her voice was sharp; he'd offended her.

"You cannot know everything," he told her. "That's the point. Some things are destroyed by the knowledge of them. If you take me, you'll have my memories, but the thing that makes me me, this thing that resists you, will forever be gone. That's what you don't understand. That's what the New Agers don't get. You can't just barge into the Stomp Dance and have the genuine Indian experience. Schrödinger's cat applies to cultural interaction. You destroy things through observation. I understand the drive—I had it myself. I tried to go back to the Nation even though I'd been brought up away from it, knew little about it. It's not the blood, or the wanting. It's the time spent loving something that makes you a part of it. You know me better than you did yesterday..."

"But not as well as I will tomorrow? Is that how it works? Is it the only way!"

He was taken aback that she cared so much. But of course, that was the zombie way. Forever to yearn for new things. Forever to absorb them and turn them into the same old McHuman. That was their tragedy. Michael understood.

"That's the human way. Yes. That's the only way."

She was crying now, bird droppings trailing down her face. He stepped closer and leaned with his back against the doorway ignoring the creaking in his joints.

"I once knew a girl, a Seagull Girl. We made a bargain. She would respect me, my body, my mind, and I'd give her an hour a day. An hour to know each other."

"I have only love for you," she said.

"Love can hurt. Everyone who wasn't brought up on Valentines and corn syrup knows that. How old are you—how old were you when... when it happened to you?" he asked

"Twenty-one. Dang, I sound like an idiot, don't I?

"No, just young. Not stupid at all." He slipped the gun back into his trousers. He felt so tired, so old. "You can have me all at once, now. You can take me and savor my memories but after that I'll be gone and all that'll remain will be a charade. Soon, you will not be able to tell me from the others. Is that what you want?" he whispered.

"It's not the same, the merging of minds... You don't understand."

"That's the point. A little mystery is a good thing."

She smiled, but then her features relaxed and she cocked her head, as if listening to something. The seagull cocked its head and squeaked. She closed her eyes, shook her head. There was another conversation going on in the room, and Michael couldn't participate. A trickle of sweat ran down his back.

"I have to go now," Seagull Girl said. "I'll come back later."

"Think about this," Mike said. "Don't let them—" but she was already out of sight.

In a way, the darkness had been a good thing. In the dark, he couldn't see the butterfly's twitching antennae, the bristling hairs of the tarantula. Before, these horrors had an expiration date, the moment when the sunlight shone red on the black earth that covered the bottom half of the basement window. Now, he could see them day and night. And he did not have the courage to turn off the lights.

Old Zombie came back a few times, but he didn't talk to Michael and stayed on the zombie side of the doorway. Another one appeared now and then. He might have been Seagull Girl's hook-up, but Michael wasn't sure. Michael waited for Seagull Girl to come back and he munched on the last of his rations. He looked at the butterfly, and at the moths laying eggs on the plaster on the other side of the Zombie Line.

She didn't come back that day, but the next she was there before he had a chance to wonder. He was relieved, and surprised to be.

"You need to take the step," she said, pacing the line. He'd been sleeping with the gun pointed at his head. He'd made it a habit to rest this way. First, because he hoped he could wake and shoot himself in the event of an attack. Second, he wanted the zombies to see him like this several times during the day. As far as he knew, they couldn't tell whether he was awake or not. He hoped they were smart enough not to risk it.

"No," he said.

"Really, Mike. It's important. We have so much to offer, your mind can't even conceive—"

"No."

"If I don't do it..." she said.

"Someone else will?" he said.

"No. Not really... Maybe?"

"No. I'd rather die."

"That's it then, isn't it? That is all?" So much anguish in her voice. He was so important. They wanted Humanity, wanted it all. And when they were done digesting, he suspected that they'd want something else with the same abandon. They'd spread out into the galaxy with equal determination. Woe on the Universe, woe. Even though he would never see it.

Zombies were congregating in the basement. They sat on the ping-pong table, played with the darts. They waited.

"I need to touch you, at least, feel you with my wings." The monarch lifted up from the fridge and hovered around Michael's head. "Just the taste of you on my feeler..."

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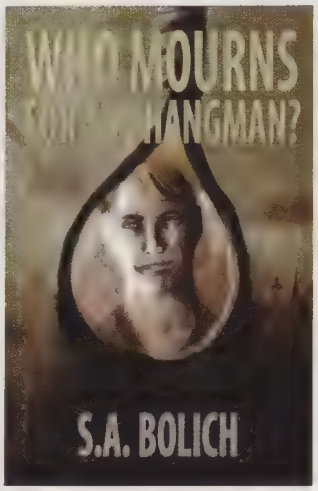

It didn't quite sound like a threat. Maybe if she could have a little of him she could refrain from taking him all. Michael nodded, and the butterfly descended and landed on his cheek. He raised his hand to swat it, just in case, but it only waltzed down his wrinkles and tickled his nose. Then it flew off and joined the seagull girl hive. Seagull Girl curtsied and Michael laughed. She turned to face the zombies behind her.

"He doesn't want to come with us," she said. "We should let him go." She actually said that.

The zombies buzzed, one of them purred. Old Zombie looked at Mike.

"She wants us to let Michael go." Michael wasn't sure who he was speaking for.

The zombies melted onto the linoleum with a whoosh. Seagull Girl cawed in anguish and drew her creatures close. No use: the flies came first, chewing and digesting. The tide of bugs on the floor shook from her screams. They convulsed into his room, onto the couch but they did not touch him. They had other prey and were as disinterested as feasting lions.

Then, it was over. Seagull Girl's seagull landed back on her head. Her eyes were moths and her chin, tarantula grey. Barnacles hung from her nipples. She hadn't had those before.

"I didn't want... I didn't say you could..."

She met empty faces.

She was silent, listening, and then she nodded. "Yes, of course. You were right, yes."

The last critters left Mike's room. The PT-911 hovered close to his neck.

"Don't do this," he said. A couple of her beetles scuttled into the room.

"I'm sorry. I owe them. I... I..." she spoke as if she were in the middle of a telephone conversation. Her attention was elsewhere.

"Seagull Girl, stay with me. You're in control here. You don't need to do what they say." But she was no longer talking to him, she was talking to them. Heaven only knew why she spoke out loud.

"Sorry," she said.

"Damn, girl, stay with me!"

He went for the PT but the seagull flew at him with beak and claws. He fired wildly, at them, at himself, and pain shot through his head and he fell.

Seagull Girl reassembled in front of him.

"We love you, Mike. We do this for love." Ant-fingers pressed against his jaws, prying them open with the strength of creatures that can lift many times their weight. Her feathers filled the room and the cicadas stopped chirping for a second. Her mouth opened and her lips touched his. A single monarch fluttered inside his mouth. ❧

In addition to working twenty-four-hour shifts as a doctor in Madrid, Sara Genge writes fiction for the sleepless mind. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons, Cosmos, Weird Tales, Shimmer, Apex Digest,* and others, including four stories in *Asimov's Science Fiction,* with translations into Spanish, Hebrew, Czech, and Greek.

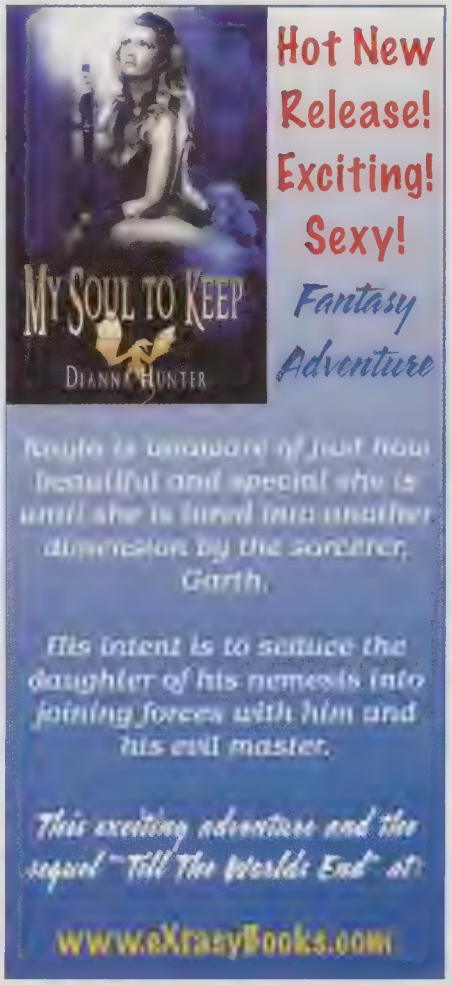

Illustration by Scott Altmann
ALTMANN

[Dragon]

All things have their price.
and the price of rule is.
of necessity, much higher.

by TD Edge

Gertrude ran, stomping the white marble squares on her bedroom floor, making sure her boots never landed on a line. The black glass doors to her balcony stood open, a pink moon peeping over the balustrade; she reached the last square and jumped.

"Ow—Gert!" said her father. "You're getting much too heavy for this." But he smiled and didn't put her down right away, so she wrapped her legs around his waist, satisfied that for once she'd made him stagger back a pace.

"You could have let me jump over the balcony," she said. "The dragon would have saved me."

She searched his green eyes.

"I saw you missing the lines," he said.

She climbed down, and went to the balustrade, leaning far out into the night so he would tell her not to, but he didn't.

"It's bad luck to step on them," she said. "And I'm going to need lots of luck tonight, because you won't tell me anything about the dragon."

She studied the big, hissing fountains and their wide, rippling pools below, and the busy little dots of the servants between them. As always, she wished she could fly down and surprise them by stepping on their heads very fast, keeping her balance, like sprinting over the rocks by the sea.

A strong gust of jasmine smothered her thoughts; the cicadas scratched in a tingly way at her ears, and suddenly she wanted to eat lots of cake. But she couldn't eat anything tonight, they'd told her; tradition forbade it.

She frowned, realizing her father hadn't spoken, even though she still leaned out dangerously and, for all he knew, could be dribbling spit onto the people below.

She turned to see him a few paces away, noticing for once the perfectly pressed navy tunic and cloak, the shiny polished black boots, and the thin gold crown in his black and grey hair, winking in the moon's peach glow.

She became aware of the sagging trousers and loose cotton shirt she'd worn for the last six days straight, and the muddy boots she wouldn't let the maids touch. She pulled matted red hair away from her face and said, "I suppose you want the servant women to scrub me with lime and pile up my hair like a big red bun on top of my head, and put me in a white dress with a girdle under it that will make me spew up everywhere."

"Gertie, you know it's—"

"Ah! Of course—that's why I can't eat tonight: so there's nothing for my girdle to squeeze out."

He looked away from her, at the moon or the spaces between the stars, and at last she felt the fear they had said would only be natural.

"Daddy?"

He turned away, walked back into her room. She followed, not bothering to miss the lines this time. He sat on her favorite oak trunk, next to her bed, gently moving aside her woolen owl and fox to make room.

She sat on the edge of her bed and waited while he traced a wooden leaf with his finger.

"You'll be the first princess in over a hundred years," he said, "and, after I'm gone, the first queen since Marlianne."

"I know that, Daddy. But I don't want to be queen."

He didn't seem to hear. "When I was at my turning age like you, I didn't need to meet the dragon to become a prince." He looked up, his smile like a forgotten promise. "But girls have to meet the dragon before they can become a princess."

"I don't believe in the dragon," she said. "No one's ever seen it."

"It lives forever, Gertie. It came a hundred years ago and it will come again tonight."

He'd caught her in his arms so many times, when she'd fallen out of trees or slipped off the saddle, and often he'd brushed aside the servants to wipe the blood and dirt from her knees himself. But he wouldn't be there tonight.

"Mother told me about it once," she said, "when I was very young. She said Queen Marlianne was a just and respected ruler of Arcanadia."

She pictured her mother's flowing red hair and always-occupied green eyes—before the sickness had sucked all the person out of her. She met her father's gaze and knew he saw the same picture.

"But," she went on, not wanting to, "no one knows what happened to Marlianne when she met the dragon. Because all the stupid books say you have to meet it alone."

"It's dead, Gert. I've slain the dragon. You don't have to take a bath and wear a dress now."

He said nothing, stricken at last.

"She lived a long life," Gertie said, "but without a husband or children."

The King of Arcanadia stood and went to his daughter; he took her in his arms and squeezed so tightly it hurt, but she said nothing.

After her father left and before the women came to fuss over her, the door opened a crack, then stopped.

"Oh, come in, Tam," she said. "I've not been womanized yet."

The boy slipped into the room, kicking shut the door with his heel.

"Your dad said I could see you," he said.

"So, you've seen me. Now you can go back to your room; it's way past your bed-time."

He went to the oak chest and picked up the fox. "Gertie—get back!" he shouted. "I've got the dragon!"

He shook it by the neck, staggering around the room, then fell onto his back. The fox leapt for his throat but he managed to pull it off and thrust it away from him; then he followed it to where it lay crumpled against the wall. He approached gingerly, prodded it with a toe, withdrew, then prodded it again.

"It's dead, Gert. I've slain the dragon. You don't have to take a bath and wear a dress now."

"You're so stupid," she said, pleased that his tunic and leggings were as scruffy as her clothes, and that her father hadn't sent him home to change.

"And you're so ugly," he said.

She watched him fidget around the room, taking sips out of her bottles of fruit juice, flicking through her books even though he knew them all as well as she did.

"Tam—what's that on your chin?" she said, delighted when he blushed and turned his face away.

She sprang to her feet and ran to him. "Let me look!"

They wrestled to the floor and although he was bigger than her these days, she was quicker and knew all his weak angles. So, after they'd rolled on the cold marble floor for a minute or two, she sat on his chest, knees pinning his arms, and grabbed his chin in her hands.

She had expected it to be rough against her skin, like her father's before he'd shaved in the morning, but the little black specks felt soft. She climbed off him and returned to the bed.

After a few moments, he sat on the oak chest, rubbing his face as if she'd punched him.

"Aren't you scared about the dragon?" he said.

"No, because I don't believe in it."

"And you call me stupid."

"Tam, why do you think there haven't been any princesses in over a hundred years?"

He glanced at her, then looked away again. "I suppose there just haven't been any royal daughters since then."

She looked out at the terrace and the night, at the moon staring back at her. "That's not very likely, is it?"

He stood, walked to the desk, and picked up her diary.

"What have you been saying about me?" he said, opening it.

"When I was born, Father said he knew there wouldn't be any other children, because of mother's illness."

He put down the diary, then joined her on the bed.

"I think," she said, "they used to get rid of the girls."

She reached for his hand, pleased he didn't pull it away and make yuk noises.

"I'll always be your friend, Gertie," he said.

"I know."

At five minutes to midnight, Gertrude's room was empty again. Now, obsessive tidiness clipped its spirit and the air cluttered in her throat from the perfumes and oils the women had doused her with, as if trying to hide her from sight.

She took a few steps toward the balcony, then stopped, dismayed at the silken crackle of her white dress and the whispering of the fine mesh stockings rubbing at her calves.

Her father had been last to leave. He'd told her she looked beautiful but that had just made her angry.

She walked on to the balcony, wishing Tam could be there, then hating him for not insisting he should be.

The cool night air brought out her skin in thousands of tiny self-consciousness points. The palace around and below her was silent, everyone no doubt holding their breath for her.

Then she dismissed them all from her thoughts, her attention caught by the stars and the vibrant deep blue nothingness between them.

Her mind pulled forward, and the dim white towers of the city beyond the palace seemed to strain toward her, as if trying to catch her attention.

Somewhere near the horizon, midnight gathered.

The air turned warmer.

"I don't believe…"

She'd been determined not to be frightened at anything she might see outside. But what she hadn't expected was for her mind to fill with long-forgotten memories, thrust into her inner view, as if being inspected by something….

Walking in the forest, when they were six or seven, she and Tam had run off from her royal guard and hid in the heavy dark trees, giggling at first. But soon the deep, ancient angles of branch and bark, and the steady climbing of the sap behind their backs, had awed them into silence. They'd never spoken about it since but she knew Tam had felt it too: the spirit of the forest.

In the palace kitchen, the head cook chopping vegetables. His blade flashed like sticklebacks turning rapidly, finely slicing, never catching his fingers bunched against the steel. He'd winked at her, not even looking at the knife as he worked, and just for a moment she'd believed that some other being, not the cook himself, actually did the chopping for him, through him.

She and her father climbing the Black Mountains, their boots scrunching the bright snow—just the two of them, no guards, and the wonderful joy of knowing they could eat their bread and hot soup when they reached the top. Then, just for a moment, the snow ripples whipping in the wind ahead, and the looming black angles of the peaks around them, seemed to her one and the same thing, as if she and her father were not in fact the conquerors here, but aliens who simply didn't understand what they trampled all over.

"Why?" she said, tears pricking her cheeks. But the images still came: the hunched backs of peasants sowing seeds, just more brown mounds in the brown fields they worked; a knight in polished armor returning to the palace after a five-year quest, removing his helmet to reveal a frightened boy; squirrels in the palace garden listening to something she wished she could hear; hundreds of servants she passed every day, in dress and manner completely different to her but also, she saw now, with exactly the same heart and brain and soul.

Finally, the memories stopped and her focus jerked outside once more, to the horizon where the mulling darkness turned its occult perception on her. The air heated further and sweat crept across her back and neck and thighs. A concentration in the black moved toward her, slowly zigzagging over the sky, like a giant snake.

It knew her, of that she had no doubt. It had stolen her memories so it would know all her weaknesses and dreams.

As the sky snake moved closer, the town and forests and mountains seemed to draw into it, giving it purpose. So it was that the land and all its people came for her, and she felt its multilayered breath on her face—odors of rice and saltwater and mud and lilies and excrement and honey—too much to cope with, engulfing her with sensation.

Then it fully hit her, filled her, so that a thousand perceptions ballooned her mind to limits she would not have believed existed. All, though, amounted to a single, priceless insight: the world and everything in it were just fragments of one immortal soul.

Then it fully hit her, filled her, so that a thousand perceptions ballooned her mind to limits she would not have believed existed. All, though, amounted to a single, priceless insight: the world and everything in it were just fragments of one immortal soul.

She joined it, her essence climbing onto its invisible back, held there by the overlapping scales of her need to see the truth of her land and what it could become.

They flew over the Black Mountains, crystal-brittle in the moonlight; then over the vast Orkan Desert beyond, where the nomads led desperate lives, dependent on the sand whales for water. Unfortunately, they also depended on the great beasts for food and had almost hunted them to extinction.

She smiled. From above, the answer was obvious: just send the army to work with the nomads to construct underground tunnels from the mountains, which would carry the melt water, safe from evaporating in the sun, irrigating the desert.

Next they flew over Milderfield, the second city of Arcanadia—a great mass of chaotic shadows and bright yellow lamplight. She had to hold her breath, however, because of the rancid tang of the place due, she remembered her tutor telling her a few months back, to the problem of the ever-increasing human sewage thrown onto the streets, then merely pushed into piles by the unfortunates who'd been found guilty of some petty crime or other.

In amongst the small, jumbled boxes of the peasant houses, the occasional walled expanse of a rich family's estate drew in relatively clean night air. She thought about the new desert crops and how they would grow better if fertilized. The rich would need persuading to fund the cart teams but then, from above, it was clear that their privileged spaces would be stunk-under eventually anyway.

And so it went on: her elevated view and the ancient force which breathed esoteric thoughts into her soul's mind showed her how weak her father's rule had been; and all the kings before him. The land beneath the cities and the farms and the villages pulsed with inter-connected intelligence, but the daily grind of making bread or making royal decisions meant no one ever heard what it had to say.

With dawn trilling the horizon, she returned to the palace.

Gertrude stood on the balcony, mute and unmoving. Just before regaining her body, she saw tendrils of blood trickling down her legs. She turned to question the essence but the night was ordinary again, and she knew there would

never be another ride, for it was in her now.

Gertrude washed herself, then put on clean stockings and adjusted her make-up in the mirror. For the first time, she didn't think it just pointless fussing, nor indeed that it made her beautiful; she simply arranged her features for the job in hand.

With an elegant yet purposeful gait, she left her room, noticing but not noting the flurry of palace staff ahead of her. Loud whispers flew around the building like messenger birds. She continued to the head of the white marble stairs where she paused, waiting for them all to gather.

Lamps flared into life and chandeliers scattered their light in a thousand glints, illuminating night-red cheeks and white knuckles and the odd sequin and her father's uninhibited, relieved smile.

She descended the stairs, weighing her love for him against what the country needed. She smiled and her people erupted into cheers and laughter, but they didn't know her calm, steady exterior obscured the fertile, tumbling, ever-birthing thoughts in her head that would completely change their futures.

The palace staff stood away from the bottom of the stairs, behind the various royals, and she had to suppress her anger at just how flabby the latter's faces seemed, compared with the workers' task-tightened ones. Well, she'd have tasks for the privileged too, soon enough.

Her father stood before the others, with Tam just behind his left shoulder. Mentally, she ran through the various actions she could take, then selected the most appropriate.

She hugged her father but broke the hold before he did. "Everything is well," she said, noting but not responding to his hurt perplexity.

Then she looked at Tam.

"When you are sixteen, Tam," she said, "I will have a task for you."

His look was easy to read and she realized she'd inadvertently given him false hope, instead of the message that they would never be lovers.

She looked up, taking them all in with a slow, sweeping gaze, then said, "I will never marry or have children. My womb is broken, yet my soul is full."

She saw Tam's despair but said nothing to alleviate it. She knew what to do now, for all her people, and it was more than enough to outweigh the small heart pains of those who had never flown the dragon. ❧

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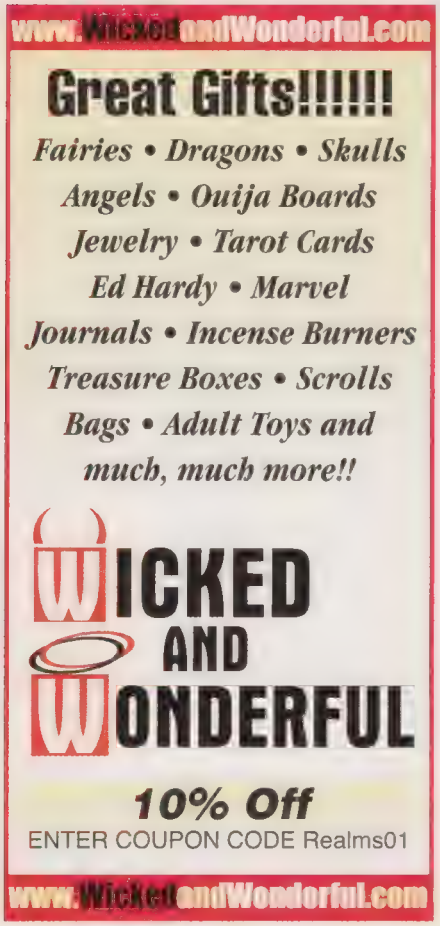

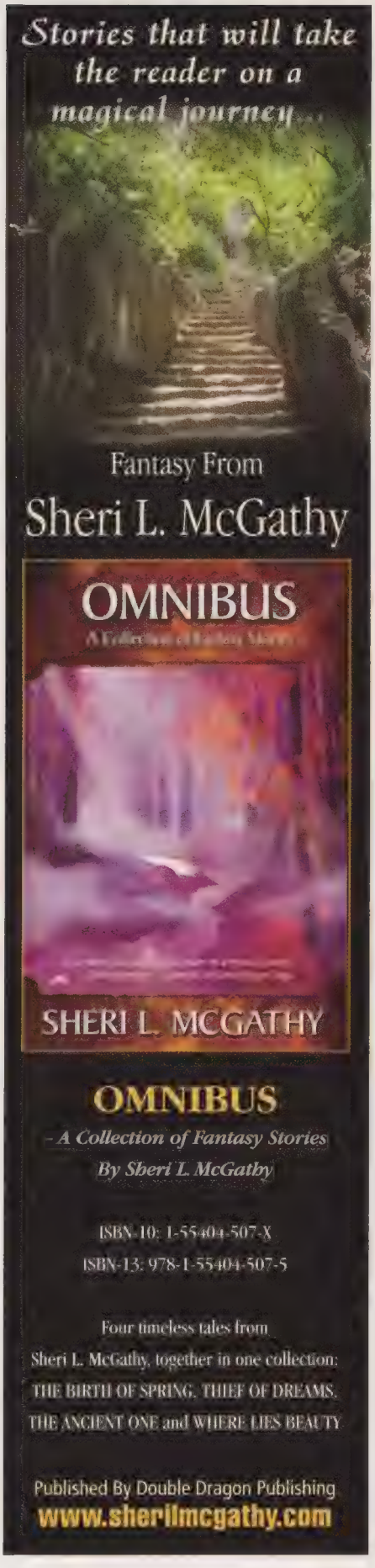
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Mad, Bad, & Dangerous: The Temptress

by SatyrPhil Brucato

Adam and Eve from the Sistine Chapel

The Original Lilith Fair

SOME DAYS, IT MUST SUCK TO BE Angelina Jolie. To embody an archetype everybody wants but few people respect. To have photographic parasites crouched around each corner waiting to add the newest chapter to a very old drama: The Innocent, Prince Charming, and the Temptress who stole him away. It doesn't matter what the human beings inhabiting the lives of Jennifer Aniston, Brad Pitt, and Angelina Jolie do; it doesn't matter what deeds good, bad, or indifferent they perform, or how they get along when the cameras aren't there. All three have been cast in archetypal roles. And of the three of them, it's Jolie, with her Lilithian gaze and vampiric allure, who most fully incarnates Original Sin.

The tabloid folklore of our supermarket sages plays out weekly dramas that are older than our celebrities, our markets, even our society. The misdeeds of the Scarlet Woman are, by some measures, as old as humanity itself. For whatever reasons, the archetype of a strong, sexual woman as an embodiment of Evil clings like witch-smoke to human folklore. Her confidence challenges men and women alike. She scares folks at a deep-core level. Regardless of—perhaps even because of—our progress toward some measure of equality, the war of the sexes continues, with the Temptress striding boldly through its bloody front lines.

In my previous article, *Mad, Bad, & Dangerous: The Demon Lover* (December 2009), we explored the wild tangle of sexual confusions and noted the *dark triad,* that intoxicating blend of sociopathy, manipulation, and rebellion that draws (and often destroys) men and women who experience its allure. We visited three left-hand embodiments of desire—the masculine Demon Lover, the feminine Temptress, and the ambiguous Androgyne—and scanned their influence on folklore, literature, and life. We saw, too, how Jung's theories of the *shadow* (repressed aspects of one's self), the *animus* (the inner masculine principle), and the *anima* (inner femininity) play roles in these potent archetypes and their appeal for us. Having given the Devil his due, we turn now to his counterpart: the Temptress, a Scarlet Woman whose ageless enchantments have bedeviled men and women since the beginning of time.

> *Everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear.*
>
> — John Keats

SMART, GORGEOUS, AND SELF-possessed, THE Temptress is raw feminine power. She radiates sex and knows how to use it. Whether she's ruling a kingdom or undermining a god, this archetype embodies desire and its costs. Women want to be her, men want to do her, and everyone's more than a little scared of her. Call her Lilith or Faith, Madonna or Melisande,

she'll take you from heaven to hell and leave you wanting more.

Where the Demon Lover is brutal, the Temptress is subtle. Her wild beauty and sweet beguilement lead men (and occasionally women) to ruin. She can, like Sade's Juliette, humble male libertines or—like George R. R. Martin's Cersei—turn continents into charnel houses. Although she seems devoted to her paramours, the Temptress is treacherous at heart. She cannot be trusted, only foresworn. Drawn from our animal instincts, she seethes with passion and ferocity. Even in the most civilized environments, the Temptress recalls the side of humanity that lusts for freedom and bridles at propriety.

Our Temptress is a lovely beast: a cat, a serpent, an owl, a fox. She shares a special bond with animals, and often becomes one herself. Like the Demon Lover, she usually boasts wild features: bird's feet, cat eyes, fish tails, and serpentine hair. Her passions recall tangled forests and crashing waves. Sneaky one moment, bold the next, she glides like cool streams and flares like sudden fire. Her youthful beauty contrasts with the withered countenance of her eventual fate, the Hag. In many tales, such as the English ballad "King Henry," Spenser's *Faerie Queene,* or H. Rider Haggard's *She,* the Temptress and the Hag trade places in an instant. She's the face and form of man's desire for youth and abhorrence of mortality. Certain portrayals of the Norse Goddess Hel depict her with the supple beauty of a Temptress on one side and the raw putrescence of a corpse on the other—a fitting symbol for the fleeting bloom of life.

La Belle Sans Merci

The protean nature of women comes through in the Temptress's legendary talent for shape-changing. Renaissance accounts claim that witches could become cats, hares, ravens, or owls; an Italian name for witch is *strega,* from *strix*—"screech owl," the name given by Classical Romans to shape-shifting female magicians. (A related word, *strigula,* is a Romanian name for "witch," "vampire," or both.) A Scottish witch-charm asserts: *"I sall goe intill a hare..."*—the form most commonly attributed to witches in British folklore. Deadly Temptresses are often called "black widows," a curse recalling the association of wise women with Grandmother Spider. Dangerous beauties are infamous for their feline qualities—just ask Catwoman! And while Circe may have brought out the inner pig in men, it is the serpent whose associations, from Lilith to Inanna to Eve to Duessa to Lamia to Mystique of the *X-Men* films, seem most appropriate to this slippery character.

In Japan, hosts of spirits take on lovely female forms. Although the Asian "dragon lady" is an invention of American pulp writers, shape-shifting *y kai* ("demons/spirits/monsters") appear as snake-women, cat-women, bat-women, and especially fox-women. Although Japan's vulpine kitsune can be of either sex, most tales present them as comely yet treacherous girls. "Any woman encountered at night," tradition asserts, "may be a kitsune." The most dangerous among them, kitsune-yako, are outright malicious, with a reputation for blood drinking and baby eating. Fox-spirits may even possess a previously virtuous woman; such *kitsunetsuki* twist a girl's limbs, sharpen her appetite, and transform her into a lusty Temptress.

Draper Ulysses: To resist her a man must be be..., um..., manly.

Although she wields magical powers, our Scarlet Woman depends more upon guile than upon force. Like the Demon Lover, this tempter demands a certain degree of consent. Yet unlike her masculine counterpart, the Temptress rarely cares much about the object of her presumed affections. Instead, she coldly discards him when his purpose has been served. As an avatar of rejection, she's often literally a castrating bitch, neutering men on every level that matters.

In Jungian terms, our Temptress is a potent symbol of the anima. Often suppressed in men, this unconscious feminine quality demands recognition. To obtain it, the anima may seduce a man, subvert his world, and take his most cherished powers away. Depending on that man and his culture, she might reflect guilt, desire, terror, or (often!) all three.

For women, the Temptress symbolizes power mixed with threat. That dark beauty often shakes the world of another, more innocent woman, challenging her to be more assertive. (Witness the Jennifer/Brad/Angelina triad.) To triumph, she must face the Temptress and possibly, as in the end of the film *Fatal Attraction,* even destroy her. A woman might also choose to become a Temptress herself, but there's nothing "safe" about her path. Prosperity may be found there, but only for those who, like Jolie, are prepared to pay its price.

And she shall wander in the witchwood under the Night of Pan, and know the mysteries of Goat and the Serpent, and of the children that are hidden away...

— John Whiteside Parsons, *The Book of Babalon*

Gender politics form the foundation of this archetype. To oppressors, she is a figure of revenge; to the oppressed, a vicarious liberation. Church fathers fulminate against Eve and her serpent while their daughters secretly dream of becoming both. As Jane Billinghurst writes in *Temptress: From the Original Bad Girls to Women on Top:* "The temptress is a composite of fact and fancy created by men and exploited by women." Men who fear feminine power rage against the Temptress, the Witch, the Enchantress. When women are beaten, burnt, stoned, or splashed with acid, the Temptress is used to justify that violence. Men, say the apologists, are weak vessels of divine favor. To earn their true place at God's hand, they must withstand the Temptress and banish her from sight. As much as some men would like to live in that heavenly boys' club, though, those damn *women* keep messing it up! With the feelings they engender and the burning lusts they inspire, the other half of humanity insists on reminding Man of his place on the living earth.

Symbolically and literally, women are life incarnate. Without Mama's womb and nourishment, the higher animals (man included) cannot exist. This dependence breeds a gallery of archetypes, from the Fairy Godmother to the Hag, and a vast helping of resentment, too. Many worldviews imagine that Man's philosophy strives toward some distant rational perfection, while Woman's earthiness grounds us in the here-and-now. Real people, naturally, are far more complex than that, but the realm of archetype and folklore employs bold and simple strokes. In that realm, the Temptress is elemental. She's fire, stone, ice, and sea. She lives, like Lilith, "in the wild wastes" and dwells, like Circe, near the shores of transformation. The Temptress rises, as Grendel's mother does in the film *Beowulf* (where she's played by Angelina Jolie), from the most conflicted currents of human consciousness. A shadow of the *anima,* she steps dripping from the dark waters of imagination and breaks Man's weapons by using them against him.

The unequal war between Man and Woman frames each Temptress tale. For while the Demon Lover is a figure of undisputed strength, the

Prince Hanzoku Menaced: The Temptress mocks man's supposed strength

Temptress—clearly his inferior in raw might—is an agent of subversion. Her ability to cut a man off at the knees (or the scalp, neck, or other vital parts) with sex appeal is literally awe-full. Biblical Delilah could chop the strongest man alive down to size, while her soul-sister Salome could wrap a king around her finger and turn the world's holiest mortal into dinner decorations. Aphrodite cuckolded the God of Smiths; Inanna cheated the God of Wisdom. This gorgeous catastrophe upends the ideal world of masculine supremacy, and this talent makes our Temptress sublime.

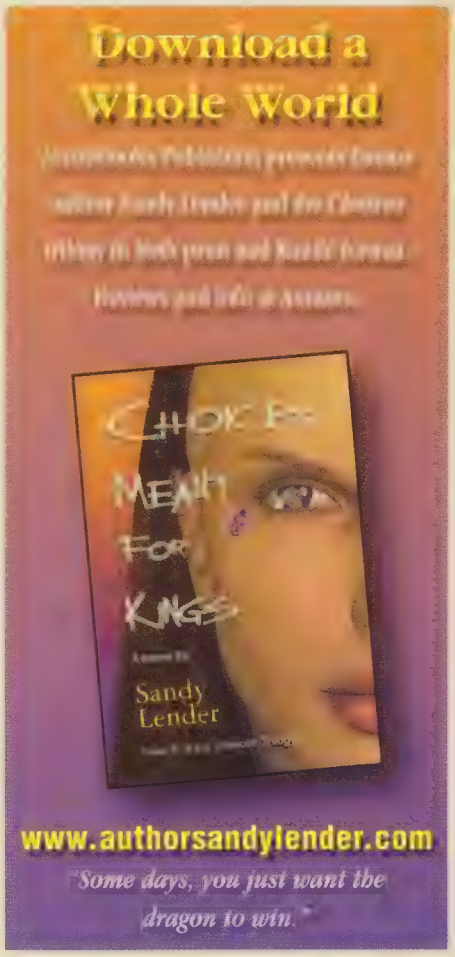
For men and women both, the Temptress holds life and death in her smile. She can breed demons, slay prophets, and literally turn men into beasts. Her vitality can entrance you even when—as she appears in Stoker's *Dracula,* August Derleth's "The Drifting Snow," or F. Marian Crawford's "For the Blood Is the Life"—the Temptress is undead. A cautionary archetype for girls (especially in tales like Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen"), this gorgeous creature remains a walking doom for Man. Although he can slay her with phallic arrows (as in the film *Van Helsing*), defang her with a stone (as Coyote does in the Ponca-Otoe tale "Teeth in the Wrong Places"), even conquer her with charisma (like Conan or James Bond) or violation (as in the manga series *The Rapeman*—ironically created by female cartoonist Keiko Aisaki), a strong man still can't resist her. The seductive legions of mermaids, sirens, kitsune, vamps, succubi, enchantresses, nymphs, naiads, selkies, Medeas, Mélusines, Red Ladies, Black Ladies, Blue Ladies, and all the ladies in between evoke the primal tension between eros and thanatos—qualities named for male gods but attributed almost universally to women.

THE FEARSOME POWERS WOMEN HOLD over life and desire seem to have captivated yet terrified men since the earliest days of recorded history. Although speculative anthropologists like Merlin Stone and Margaret Murray proposed a golden age of Goddess-worship in books like *When God Was a Woman* and *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe,* the earliest folklore we possess contains brutal avatars of feminine malice, characters not unlike the tabloid portraits of Ms. Jolie herself.

In the Babylonian Epic of Creation, the primordial dragon Tiamat emerged as salty dark oceans of chaos. Mingling her waters with the freshwater spirit of Apsu, she gave birth to the gods, who—in what would become a familiar parricidal pattern—eventually killed her, too. Like so many of her descendants, Tiamat supposedly deserved such treatment; disgusted by her offspring (who had already killed her mate Apsu), she consorted with the god Quingu to sire a brood of monsters. The god Marduk killed them all, giving special treatment to Tiamat and Quingu. Ripping Mama Dragon apart "like a dried fish," Marduk built the heavens, earth, and seas with the remains, then had Quingu executed; from the latter's blood, Marduk made human beings... as a slave race created to raise Babylon to the glory of the gods. Nice guy, that Marduk.

A similar divine sundering occurs in Hebrew lore. After the Lord created human beings as eight-limbed hermaphrodites, he passed his hand between them, creating male and female. We know the first man as Adam; his mate, however, was not Eve. According to the *Midrash of Ben-Sirah,* that original partner was the true "first woman": the archetypal Temptress Lilith.

Like so many of her daughters, Lilith refuses to behave as the boys think she should. Although her "sin" is said to have been pride rather than lust (she demanded to mount Adam herself, rather than submit to being mounted by him), she became that lethal Temptress in revenge. Fleeing Eden, Lilith protested Adam's treatment to God himself; in some heretical tales, she even became Yahweh's lover for a time. Yet her desire to be her own creature drove Lilith to the wastelands, where she supposedly mated with demons, birthed monstrosities, and eventually took up with Samael, Asmodeus, or perhaps Lucifer himself. (The "Demon of Wrath" [*Aeshma-Deva*], Asmodeus is sometimes translated as "Destroyer of God." Asmodeus was also considered the Demon Prince of Lust, literal-



Lilith carving: Lilith displays animal features and elemental appeal

ly a Demon Lover who was frequently blamed for cases of erotic demon possession like those at Loudin, France, in the 1630s.)

Three angels are said to have been sent to bring Lilith home to Eden, but she was having none of it. Those angels—Sanvi, Sansanvi, and Semangelaf—then slaughtered her demon children. Swearing vengeance upon the children of Adam and his new partner Eve, Lilith was barred from the act by the infanticidal angels. For millennia afterward, Jewish parents protected their offspring with magic circles around their cradles and amulets inscribed with the names of those angelic partisans, along with the words "barring Lilith" or "protect this child from all harm."

(Eve was not the *second* woman, either. According to rabbinical tradition—cited by Robert Graves and Raphael Patai in *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis*—God crafted a woman while Adam watched. Adam was so revolted by the sight that he refused to name the poor creature, much less take her as his mate. God obligingly dispersed the second woman into dust, sent Adam off to nap, and performed the fabled ribectomy. We all know what happened after that...)

Lilithian legends predate the Jewish texts, influencing those later tales in both form and substance. Akkadian texts mention male *lilû* and female *lil-tu*, malignant spirits who haunted the open wastes and presented grave danger to young women, men, and infants. The *ardat-lil* ("maiden lilû") acted more like a sexually frustrated bride than a demonic seducer, but her fury focused itself on virile young men. "She is not a wife, a mother," reads a cuneiform passage cited in *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, "she has not known happiness, has not undressed in front of her husband, has no milk in her breasts." This Temptress had sex out of spite, poisoning her lovers and perhaps their children as well.

Lilith's oldest extant adventure mingles her with another Temptress figure: the goddess Inanna. According to the epic poem *Gilgamesh and the Huluppu-Tree* (approximately 2000 B.C.E), the Sumerian Superman rushes off to save Inanna's garden from a lethal threesome nesting in the willow tree. These unwanted guests include a dragon, a Zu-bird, and Lilith herself. Gilgamesh does what heroes often do to dragons, thus sending Lilith fleeing "to the desert" in whose wastes she is so often found.

Judging by her own legends, though, Inanna probably didn't need Gilgamesh's help. Under her many names, this goddess was presented as a ferocious patron of war, sexuality, and deceit. Inanna won many of her divine purviews from Enki, God of Wisdom, in a drinking game; later, she descended into the Underworld to confront her dark sister Ereshkigal, "Queen of the Great Below," and then rose again to life, bearing somber gifts of wisdom. Although most surviving tales remain sympathetic to her adventures, the Goddess's Akkadian name *Ishtar* was later corrupted by demonologists into the sinister *Ashtoreth* (occasional patron of Solomon the Wise) and the sometimes-masculine *Astaroth*. While early divisions between "good" and "evil" were not as codified then as they eventually would become, these primal figures all embody the human ambivalence about sex.

Where ambivalence hovers, wisdom often waits. The Kabbalistic book *Emeq haMelekh* (*Valley of the Kings*) invokes an alchemical Lilith who seduces not only Adam and Yahweh but Eve as well: "And the Serpent, the Woman of Harlotry, incited and seduced Eve through the husks of Light which in itself is holiness. And the Serpent seduced Holy Eve, and enough said for him who understands." *"Enough said,"* indeed, although the significance of that passage goes beyond sex. The reference to "husks" suggests a connection to the *Qlippoth,* "shells" or "husks" of Creation forsaken by the Lord, that provide a shadow of Divinity itself. Related lore in the *Treatise on the Left Emanation* of Rabbi Isaac ben Jacob Ha-Kohen describes "...the Secret Knowledge of the Lesser Palaces which is... a ladder by which one ascends to the prophetic levels." The *Treatise* describes Lilith as a "serpent," a "blind dragon," and "a beautiful woman... from the waist down she is burning fire." This infernal twin sister to Eve, "born in the same hour in the image of Adam and Eve," was created "intertwined (with Samael) in one another" as an intentional divine parody of the first people. These images suggest Jung's concepts of the shadow and *anima:* forbidden elements of suppressed psyche that must be recognized and embraced before a person can become whole.

These esoteric portraits of the Temptress provide another role for her. Despite her literally sinister aspect, she's also an initiator to sacred mysteries—a shadow of both humanity and God. Michelangelo captures this concept with a Lilithian serpent coiled around the Tree of Knowledge. His Sistine Chapel fresco features a clearly female serpent reaching out—with her left hand—to Eve in subtle reflection of Yahweh's right hand reaching toward Adam. Talk about subversive! This Gnostic interpretation may suggest that the Temptress is an agent of deeper secrets, bound to mortality but offering wisdom amidst damnation.

The real-life Demon Lover magician Aleister Crowley had his own view on the Scarlet Woman. Taking a cue from Revelations 7:4-5—*"I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet beast, arrayed in purple and scarlet color, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls... And upon her head was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATION OF THE EARTH"*—Crowley conceived a mystic ideal he christened "Babalon." A counterpart to the raging nature of masculine force, Babalon embodies "love, understanding, and Dionysian freedom." Incarnated as a mortal sex partner, Babalon was described by Crowley as *"robust, vigorous, eager, sensible, hot and healthy; flesh, nerve and blood being tense, quick and lively, easily enflamed, and nigh inextinguishable."* A master of inversion, Crowley took the Scarlet Woman from her parade of shame and elevated her to carnal godhood. Decades later, Roman Polanski made her the guardian of his film *The Ninth Gate;* portrayed by Emmanuelle Seigner (and adapted from *The Club Dumas* by Arturo Pérez-Reverte), this nameless and beautiful "girl" helps Johnny Depp's bewildered seeker complete his quest and then leads him through the gate toward a bright, if sinister, wisdom.

I have found a woman more bitter than death... because that is natural and destroys the body, but the sin which arose from woman destroys the soul...

— Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *De Malleus Maleficarum*

Warwick Sirens: Sirens play their deadly games

Far beyond the Fertile Crescent, the Temptress and her kin bedeviled frail humanity. The Greek hills, forests, and seas teemed with seductive nymphs, bloodthirsty maenads, voracious sirens, and savage Amazons. Norsemen spoke in hushed tones of gold-hoarding Rhine Maidens, slaughter-loving Valkyries, and the icy halls of Hel. Camelot shuddered under the carnal treacheries of Guinevere, Viviane, and Morgan le Fay, while vain Queen Maeve washed Connaught in blood and sent black ravens to bring down Cuchulain. Romanian peasants feared the capriciously vampiric *ielles* and their mistress Aripa Satanei, Queen of the Bad Spirits. Irish folk trembled when the *beansidhe* howled for the death of someone dear. Hone-onna, the skeleton woman, cloaked her bony form in beautiful skin. The Black Lady Demoiselle Noire de Gruchy drew young men into her tower, then transformed them into plants or disemboweled them, draping her hedges with their intestines. The Snow Queen Scheefraülein captured lovers with shards of frozen desire. Given the hordes of demonic ladies and their enchantments, it's a wonder mankind survived at all!

Most Temptress legends display distinct elements of masculine guilt and weakness: maenads and Amazons

forsake male-run societies, while sirens and mermaids lure men "over the side" of a well-run ship. The *cecaelia* ("octopus-girl") snares unwary men with her tentacles, just as Death-Bringing-Woman devours her suitors from the genitals on up. Like legends of the male Demon Lover, Temptress stories often demand complicity on the part of the injured party. To succumb to her is to display weakness and be destroyed by it. (Incidentally, *succumb* shares the root-word of *succubus*—a word which means "to lie beneath.")

This weakness could bring mighty men low—just ask Arthur, Merlin, and Lancelot! Such allure reaches beyond the realm of myth and into our own world. In his *Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans,* Plutarch mocks Mark Antony for his infatuation with real-life Temptress Cleopatra; following the lead of Octavian's propaganda (which emphasized the role of eunuchs in the Egyptian court), Plutarch proclaimed that Cleopatra *"awaken(ed) and kindle(d) to fury passions that as yet lay still and dormant in his nature, to stifle and finally corrupt any elements that yet made resistance in him..."* Similar accusations were leveled at Lucrezia Borgia, Eva Perón, Veronica Franco, and Marilyn Monroe, among many others. Bill Clinton marred his legacy with "Lewinskygate," while manly *Ah*-nold lost conservative brownie points for marrying a Kennedy. And then, of course, there's Angelina Jolie, the tattooed ambassador who still can't shake the scarlet mantle. "There has always," notes Jane Billinghurst, "been the pervasive feeling that men, the rational sex, impose order, whereas women, the emotional sex, subvert it."

Conquering the Temptress has traditionally been a sign of male power. The Buddha, it is said, dispelled the demon-king Mara's beautiful yet infernal daughters Tanha ("Craving"), Raga ("Passion"), and Arati ("Aversion"). Theseus "subdued" the Amazon Queen Hippolyta after Heracles stole her girdle. Conan the Barbarian wades through wenches like it's going out of style—ironic, considering that his creator Robert E. Howard was a shy (if burly) mama's boy whose biggest fans are male teenagers. Howard's pulp-fiction descendents have followed suit, most notably the antiheroes of John Norman's Gor novels. "I knew," says Norman's female in *Captive of Gor,* "that he was dominant over me... It had to do with the fact that he was totally masculine." In this archaic yet pervasive patriarchal view, the Temptress will chew you up and spit you out unless you can "man up" and take her down.

Castration anxiety provides a major theme in Temptress tales. Samson and the Baptist receive close shaves from hot women, while the *galli* priests of Kybele emasculate themselves for her sake. The so-called "brides" of *Dracula* bend over Jonathan Harker, and although Stoker never says as much, their sharp teeth may be heading lower than his neck. Maenads fling bits of various Greek heroes every-which-way. And then there's the penis tree, a bizarre concept from Italian witchcraft tales that appears in that gynophobic opus, the *Malleus Maleficarum.*

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According to Kramer and Sprenger, witches *"sometimes collect male organs in great numbers, as many as 20 or 30 members together, and put them in a bird's nest, or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members, and eat oats and corn."* A medieval mural discovered in Tuscany depicts such a tree, and although these tales seem absurd in our era, so-called "witches" are being harassed and killed in parts of Africa even now—with magical castration being used as a common accusation against them.

> *You're not too smart. I like that in a man.*
>
> — Matty Walker, Body Heat

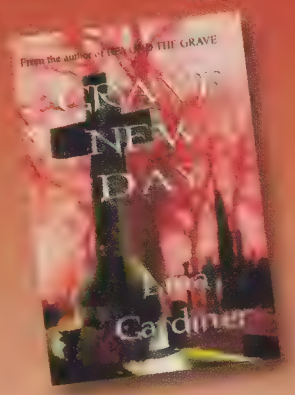
This fear becomes most apparent in tales of the dreaded *vagina dentata* ("vagina with teeth"). Commonly found in the legends of Oceana and North America, this beauty has an unfortunate bite. Several Coyote tales find him dealing out rough trade to such Temptresses; he spears one through "the lower mouth" with a flaming branch, then takes another and knocks out her teeth with a rock. A similar folktale from Bastar tells of a rakshasa's daughter with vaginal choppers; she could assume the form of a tigress, and lived with twelve tigers of her own. After castrating a man, she would feed him to her cats. This Temptress, though, made the mistake of killing six brothers; the youngest sibling bashed her teeth in with an iron pipe, then cursed her to become a *chamgedri*—a monster that eats, copulates, and eliminates through the same hole. More recently, Mitchell Lichtenstein's 2007 movie *Teeth* gives the legend a darkly comical spin. The misogyny in such tales is almost palpable. Small wonder, then, that Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* evoke that image with a feminist twist!

For obvious reasons, our Temptress often wants revenge, either for personal wrongs or for slights against her sex. Medea is the quintessential example of this trope, avenging Jason's bad behavior by slaughtering their kids. Hard-edged Faith from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* takes her harsh life out on everyone within reach. The defiled ex-lover of Lucy Taylor's "Flesh Artist" is justified in her wet revenge. Sometimes even a "good girl" must play the Temptress; confronted by the gynocidal Elf-Knight, Lady Isabel seduces him and then, as he sleeps, inflicts a well-earned death. Rough justice, it seems, may wear a beautiful disguise.

Is the Temptress misunderstood? We find that view in *The Mists of Avalon*, where Morgan le Fay becomes Morgaine, slandered priestess of the Great Goddess. Jessica Rabbit really *does* love Roger, even if she's drawn bad. "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes," in Harlan Ellison's tale, is *"determined as hell never to abide in that vale of poverty her mother had called purgatory for her entire life."* Along a similar theme, the gender-switching immortal Anna from Graham Masterson's "Changeling" shows men what it's like to be a sexy woman in their world. *"Let no one think me,"* says Medea, *"a weak one, feeble-spirited... but rather, just the opposite, one who can hurt my enemies and help my friends; for the lives of such persons are most remembered."*

The most memorable power of the Temptress involves taking Man's weakness and directing it against him. Turning his world inside out, she inverts hierarchy, changes shape, shifts expectations, and drinks his potency dry—all with his consent! Like Madonna, whose Temptress career has spanned three decades, this character claims power from out of powerlessness. With it, she can open gates, breed monsters, even change the world. In time, this Bad Girl might even become an avatar of virtue—on her own terms, of course! The tabloids may rage, but Angelina Jolie's still smiling. She's got the guy, the goods, and some literal goodwill to boot. Temptress or not, her legacy looks secure.

Grave New Day
by Lina Gardiner



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August 2010 Book Reviews: Dragonfly Falling, The Left Hand of God, The Gaslight Dogs, Choices Meant for Kings

by Paul Witcover and Matt Staggs

Since the success of Random House's experiment with Naomi Novik, publishing each novel of her Temeraire trilogy in quick succession and to great acclaim, other publishers have jumped on the bandwagon. I confess that I was dubious about this strategy at first, fearing that it would dump a new author into the marketplace too fast, flooding bookstores with sequels before the author's first book had a chance to grab an audience. Not for the first time, it appears I was wrong. At any rate, speaking as both a book reviewer and an avid reader, I'm glad that I no longer have to wait a year or more for the next installment from a favorite writer. All of which brings me by a rather roundabout route to Adrian Tchaikovsky's ***Dragonfly Falling*** (Pyr, trade paperback, 468 pp., $16.00, ISBN: 978-1616141950), the second novel in the Shadows of the Apt trilogy, whose first volume, *Empire in Black and Gold*, I reviewed in the previous issue of this magazine—and quite favorably, too.

Second books of trilogies are notoriously—if you'll excuse me—apt to be placeholders, resolving certain minor mysteries, and introducing new ones, moving the main character or characters nearer to the completion of their tasks while contriving fresh obstacles. The effect is very often like the moment in *Through the Looking-Glass* where the Red Queen explains to a breathless and befuddled Alice, "Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place." *Dragonfly Falling* avoids this treadmill fate. It's an even better book than its predecessor, which is saying something. Reading it so soon after *Empire* was an illuminating experience; I had the impression that I was watching a writer grow before my eyes as a craftsman and artist, moving from an already high level to an even higher one. In my review of *Empire*, I compared Tchaikovsky to Scott Lynch, China Miéville, and K. J.

Parker, with the caveat that he had not yet reached their level. Well, you can scratch that as of now. With *Dragonfly Falling*, Tchaikovsky stakes a claim to the first rank of contemporary epic fantasists.

Warning: for those who have not yet read Empire, some spoilers necessarily follow.

Tchaikovsky's secondary world constitutes one of the most striking and cohesive subcreations in recent memory, a vibrant, believable place with a mythology and history of its own, yet which engages meaningfully and at times provocatively with our own world. There is more than a touch of steampunk to his setting, but also an atmosphere of decadent but still dangerous magic that reminded me of Moorcock and Leiber.

In the distant past of this world, humans were the prey of gigantic insects who seem to have possessed magical abilities of some kind. To survive, various tribes of humans entered into totemic relationships with these insects, gaining protection from the insects in question and also physical, magical, and psychological enhancements based on the qualities, metaphorical and otherwise, of the insects. For example, Ant-kinden possess a hive mind, Mantis-kinden are deadly fighters, Spider-kinden are unparalleled schemers and manipulators, and so on. For thousands of years, long after most of the giant insects themselves vanished from the scene, the more magically adept kinden ruled over their fellows like gods; but then, about five hundred years ago, in and around an area called the Lowlands, certain of the subject races—Ant-kinden, Beetle-kinden, Wasp-kinden, among others—awoke to the possibilities of science and engineering. These kinden, able to create and wield technology, rose up against their overlords, who quickly learned that their magic had its limits when faced with projectile weapons beyond their esoteric understanding. Thrones toppled; empires fell.

The victorious Apt formed city-states that jealously guard their freedom while relentlessly seeking to subjugate their neighbors—it's all very reminiscent of Ancient Greece. To the north of the Lowlands is the vast empire of the Dragonfly-kinden; to the south, the mysterious lands of the Spider-kinden—though neither of these kinden are Apt, they dwell in an uneasy peace with the Apt of the Lowlands. The same can't be said of the Moth-kinden, who once ruled much of the Lowlands; the pitiful remnants of

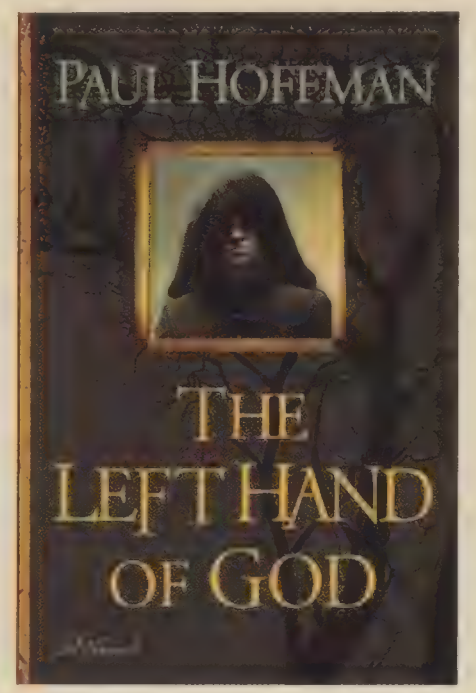
this once-powerful empire are engaged in a guerilla war against their former slaves. But they are mere shadows of what they once were, due to their desperate employment, when defeat could no longer be evaded by other means, of forbidden magic in a dense forest known as the Darakyon, magic that went disastrously awry, and which rendered those woods a haunted place, full of eerie presences and malign intent—a darker, creepier Fangorn Forest.

Here I want to pause to bring up two more influences on Tchaikovsky's work: Lovecraft and Tolkien. He incorporates aspects from these giants into his own vision without succumbing to the snares of imitation that have tripped up lesser writers. I talked about Tolkien's influence in my review of *Empire*, so I'm not going to repeat that here. But in *Dragonfly*, the cold and brooding malignity of Lovecraftian horror rises up significantly for the first time, and its appearance is both surprising and effective, adding a deeply weird and unsettling aspect to the cultures of the kinden.

In *Empire*, the status quo in and around the Lowlands was shattered by a new empire: an empire of Wasp-kinden who single-mindedly, wielding technology and their ancestral magic, set out to conquer and enslave their neighbors. Stenwold Maker, a Beetle-kinden, had long warned of the dangers of the Wasps, only to be ignored, but in *Dragonfly* their intentions are beyond dispute as they invade the Lowlands in force, sending their armies directly against the Ant city of Tark and moving indirectly against Collegium, the center of Lowlands learning and tolerance.

To oppose the Wasps, Stenwold recruited a network of spies, including Totho, a half-breed engineer, Salma, a Dragonfly princeling, his niece, Cheerwell, her Moth lover, Achaeos, and his adopted daughter, Tynisia, a Mantis/Spider half-breed who, in a pivotal moment of *Empire*, was revealed to be the natural daughter of Stenwold's oldest friend, a deadly Mantis Weaponsmaster named Tisamon. These characters continue to play important roles, though Tchaikovsky puts them through emotional and physical wringers that test their flaws, breaking them in some places, strengthening them in others. This is especially true of Totho, who was underutilized in the first book. A brilliant inventor who suffers the pangs of unrequited love for Cheerwell, Totho comes into his own here as, captured by Wasps besieging Tark, he faces a torturous choice that will have the widest possible repercussions.

Thalric, a member of the Wasp equivalent of the SS, was the bad guy in *Empire*; now he undergoes a similar testing, with the result likely to be as much a surprise to readers as it is to Thalric himself. Tchaikovsky really is adept at taking characters we think we know



well and revealing unexpected depths; his characters are inconstant, changeable, often swayed by emotion—or the denial of emotion: in short, they are fully human creations. Tchaikovsky also does a great job in combining revelations of character with plot twists, making them reinforce each other.

A number of significant new characters appear. There is the emperor of the Wasps, Alvdan the Second, a psychopath who has murdered his entire family, save for his younger sister, Seda, whom he keeps alive for sadistic as well as political purposes. There is Uctebri, who belongs to a kinden so ancient it is thought by most people to be a myth; with a subtlety Spider-kinden would envy, he seeks the means to return the Apt to slavery. There is Felise Mienn, a half-mad Dragonfly woman on an obsessive quest for Thalric. And lastly Arianna, an attractive young Spider-kinden who brings an unexpected—and unlooked for—element into Stenwold's stern, abstemious life.

Outshining them all is Colonel-Auxillian Drephos, an engineering genius crippled in mind and body, who, despite his status as a slave, gleefully helps the Wasps extend their conquests, caring only for the opportunity to advance the science of weaponry. He might have stepped—or limped, rather—from the pages of K. J. Parker's grindingly grim Engineer trilogy.

With action taking place all across the Lowlands and beyond, Tchaikovsky divides his protagonists to give readers an emotional stake in what is taking place on the battlefield and behind the scenes. Thus, we are witness, through Stenwold and others, to the long siege of Collegium; to a pitched battle outside the Ant-city of Sarn; to mysterious, magic-drenched rites in the sacred forests of the Mantis-kinden, where Tisamon brings Tynisia to prove her worth...or die; and to the repulsive manipulations of Uctebri, armed with an ancestor art of a particularly vile nature. From these individual perspectives, the scope of the entire conflict comes into view, and it is both wider and deeper—historically speaking—than most of the participants can understand...for something long thought lost or banished or dead is reawakening, and it has an agenda of its own.

The final volume of the trilogy, *Blood of the Mantis*, is already in my to-be-read pile; I'll be reviewing it in the next issue of *Realms*. In the meantime, if you haven't yet begun this series, do yourself a favor and pick up *Empire of Black and Gold*—Tchaikovsky is the real deal.

COMING TO THESE SHORES ON WINGS of hype is Paul Hoffman's ***The Left Hand of God*** (Dutton, hardcover, 448

pp., $25.95, ISBN: 978-0525951315), "the first novel"—as the cover puts it—"in a groundbreaking new series of imaginative fiction." Excessive hype often generates a backlash, and such has been the case in the UK, where the novel has already appeared; an initial flurry of positive reviews gave way to a spate of harsh judgments—the praise, in my view, was often excessive, and the criticisms, likewise, were in my opinion misdirected and overhasty for what is, after all, only the first installment of a longer work. The truth is, this is a very ambitious and somewhat idiosyncratic fantasy, well-written, with engaging characters and a bleak, often-brutal setting that is conveyed with conviction. True, its world-building at times feels a bit slapdash, as if the author has pulled disparate elements from history and art willy-nilly, with scarce regard for whether or not they hang together cohesively; but on the other hand, where an author demonstrates competence on many levels, as Hoffman does, I'm inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt in other matters, especially in the first novel of a series, where it is not unreasonable to expect that much of what seems confusing will later be satisfactorily resolved. Hoffman expects a lot of his readers: patience and trust, for starters.

Like Phillip Pullman's His Dark Materials series, which is the nearest comparison I can think of, this novel is set in an alternate reality that in many respects parallels our own, yet departs from it in significant ways. Also like Pullman, Hoffman appears to have an axe to grind against Christianity, specifically Catholicism, and, again like Pullman, he grinds its edge very sharp indeed. Pullman's world features a blend of steampunky science and a magic so intrinsic to the nature of things that it is itself merely another branch of science; Hoffman's world is less technologically advanced—more on the traditional fantasy level of swords and bows and arrows—and seemingly less infused with magic, though there are numerous hints that magic does exist, and that it may well be as intrinsic, or natural, a part of the world as Pullman's is. But that is for future volumes to reveal.

The analog to Christianity here is the Church of the Redeemer, which worships a Christlike figure called the Hanged Redeemer; interestingly, Jesus did exist in this world, only he was apparently a Jonah-like figure, devoured by a whale. Hoffman drops hints in an almost offhand manner—but I feel sure they are deliberately placed—that serve both as points of commonality between his world and our own and as points of departure. I have a strong sense that these points are not random but will ultimately cohere in a meaningful manner: by meaningful I mean that they will make sense in their own context and also cast an illuminating and explicative light on the distinctive differences and similarities between this world and our own—as is the case in Pullman's novels. But for now, readers have to take that on faith.

The Church of the Redeemer is a joyless, perverted caricature of the Catholic Church (admittedly, these days the Catholic Church seems ever more like a perverted caricature of itself). It is engaged in a fight to the death with a schismatic sect, the Antagonists, who stand to it in the same relation as the Protestant churches to the Catholic Church. Here are wars of reformation even bloodier and more fanatical than those which culminated in our own Thirty Years' War. The Church of the Redeemer raises boys to be its priests and soldiers, and it raises them without love or pity: crushing their wills and molding them into fearsome warriors...at least, the ones who survive.

This is the story of one such boy, fourteen-year-old Thomas Cale. Cale is brutalized even more than his fellow inmates in the Sanctuary of the Redeemers, singled out for special torment by one of the instructors, Bosco, the Lord Militant, who teaches military history and strategy. Bosco rains physical and psychological abuse of the most horrific sort upon his young charge, many times restraining himself only with the greatest difficulty from murdering Cale outright—a crime which occurs frequently in the Sanctuary, and which is in fact no crime at all, but simply evidence of the incorrigibly sinful nature of the boys who have the misfortune to be incarcerated there.

Cale's spirit and body are not broken, however, but grow stronger under this treatment, though this is not to say that considerable scars, emotional and otherwise, are not also inflicted. It is clear that Bosco sees potential in Cale, that, despite his hatred for the boy, he is honing Cale's natural abilities as a killer for some purpose. Hoffman withholds the revelation of that purpose until very late in the novel, but when it comes, it falls like a hammer stroke.

But before that can happen, Cale's adventures will take him beyond the walls of the Sanctuary into a world readers will find familiar and strange—a world in which Cale is both a naïve intruder and a dangerous weapon. It begins one night when Cale is dispatched to the rooms of Redeemer Picardo, the Lord of Discipline, to receive yet another punishment. There Cale interrupts Picardo in the midst of an act of

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depraved cruelty involving two bound girls; without even thinking, stirred by an instinctive revulsion, Cale kills the man...and rescues the one girl who is still alive—in the process removing a mysterious object, like "a small pebble washed smooth by long exposure to a fast-flowing stream," that he had watched the priest extract from the first girl's stomach: an object possessing a "strange but wonderful perfume." Knowing that he is now a dead man, Cale gathers his only two friends, Kleist and Vague Henri, and puts into motion a previously developed plan to escape from the Sanctuary—the success of which is the first real indication readers receive as to Cale's tactical resourcefulness.

Eluding their pursuers, Cale, Kleist, and Henri—along with the rescued girl, Riba—make their way across the border and into a city called Memphis, capital of the neighboring kingdom, an empire ruled by a decadent aristocracy. The Redeemers have always ignored Memphis, intent as they are on their war with the Antagonists, but Cale's presence will change all that, for Bosco is intent on getting him back. To do this, he enlists the aid of the lord of the Memphis criminal underworld, a creature—seemingly inhuman—called Kitty the Hand.

The martial skills of Cale, Kleist, and Henri earn them a privileged if precarious position in Memphis society; scorned and feared alike by the aristocratic ruling class, they are valued by the chancellor, Vipond, for their knowledge of the Redeemers, in whom this shrewd man sees a potential enemy worthy of respect. Despite their youth, Cale and his friends—and Cale especially—find themselves thrust into positions of authority when the Redeemers invade...leading up to a clever twist on the Battle of Agincourt.

It isn't just the complicated pleasures and responsibilities of freedom that Cale discovers in Memphis: he also falls in love. The object of his affections is a beautiful young woman named Arbell Swan-Neck, who is both repulsed and attracted to the brash and in many ways quite savage interloper. Love is the one circumstance that Cale's upbringing has left him ill-suited to contend with, and its introduction into the patchwork armor of his personality is movingly presented. The love affair between Arbell and Cale takes on genuinely tragic dimensions—if you consider *Romeo and Juliet* a tragedy. Much is left unresolved by Hoffman: the strange ambergris-like object removed from the girl's stomach; the nature of Kitty the Hand; the identity of the Hanged Redeemer; how Memphis and other glaring analogues to our own world and history actually relate to our world...if they do at all. But it's clear by the end of the novel that Cale's journey is only just beginning, and that it will be a stranger and very likely bloodier journey than he could have ever imagined.

If you are the sort of reader who likes all your questions neatly answered, then this is probably not the book for you. But if, like me, you appreciate writers who challenge your expectations and evidence a relatively high opinion of your intelligence, then *The Left Hand of God* will not disappoint.

***The Gaslight Dogs*, by Karin Lowachee, Orbit, mass market paperback, 368 pp., $7.99 ISBN: 978-0316021791**

Author Karin Lowachee looks to America's bloody past as the inspiration for *The Gaslight Dogs*, an engaging work of fantasy sure to appeal to fans of steampunk and alternative history.

A war rages in the young nation of Ciracusa. The conflict parallels the Indian Wars of the nineteenth century, with technologically advanced settlers—outcasts from a far-away land—waging a war of extermination against the native peoples of their new home, themselves largely analogous to America's First Nations.

Captain Jarrett Fawle is a soldier in the Ciracusan army, one of many pushing against the boundaries of the frontier in the name of progress. It's a dangerous job, but it keeps him far from the maddening bustle of the city and his estranged father, an army general.

While the army which Fawle serves possesses both superior numbers and firepower, the natives (or "abos" as they are called in the book) have a

tradition of powerful shamanic magic, the most apparent being their shamans' use of "Dogs." These Dogs are wolflike physical manifestations of their spirits, separate yet intimately connected. The Dogs can travel long distances to observe and track enemies, and are invulnerable to attack. However, controlling these Dogs can be tricky. They're unpredictable, and once unleashed, can only be forced to return to their host body through the sacred magic of another shaman.

Intrigued by the Dogs and only too aware of the strategic advantage their use could bring in warfare, General Fawle recalls his son home. There, he is pressed into the apprenticeship of Sjennonirk, a Spiritwalker, or shaman, imprisoned after her own Dog murdered a soldier and a missionary. Despite the initial protestations of the shaman that the settlers have no such magic, the training yields results: Jarrett discovers his Dog. This discovery prompts him to delve even deeper into the roots of his troubled relationship with his father, and to reconsider his life with the army.

Lowachee excels in delivering significant back-story without overwhelming the action at the forefront, and *The Gaslight Dogs* is a fantasy with a rich, believable setting. The Dogs described by Lowachee are an intriguing take on the concept of shamanic power animals, and the conflict between the native peoples and the forces of Ciracusa raises some important questions about the human cost of real world imperialism. *The Gaslight Dogs* rings with a feeling of historic verisimilitude while still being a lively and diverting read, amply demonstrating that fantasy fiction can be more than simple escapism.

Choices Meant for Kings, by Sandy Lender, Archebooks Publishing, hardcover, 408 pp., $29.99, ISBN: 978-1595072191

In *Choices Meant for Gods*, readers were introduced to the world of Onweald and to Amanda Chariss, a young woman born with the natural ability to perform magic. An orphan and the ward of the wizard Hrazon, Chariss and her guardian were forced to flee the attention of the murderous, power-hungry sorcerer Jamieson Drake. During this time, Chariss became the protector of a god, Rothahn, and the lover of Nigel, the grandson of Rothahn. Now, in *Choices Meant for Kings*, Nigel is hiding something important from Chariss and Hrazon, and Lord Drake and the evil goddess Julette the Betrayer marshall their forces against them all.

The second installment of the Choices trilogy, *Choices Meant for Kings* delivers everything that Lender's readers found so captivating about her first book—a heroine's struggle to shoulder an overwhelming responsibility, fantasy in a romantic scope—and resumes the story on the periphery of an epic battle that could destroy everything the characters worked for. While *Choices Meant for Kings* fits in the romantic fantasy subgenre, this is still a novel with plenty of bite: when swords fly from their sheaths, Lender doesn't skimp on the action. Readers whose tastes lean toward epic fantasy may find plenty to enjoy here as well.

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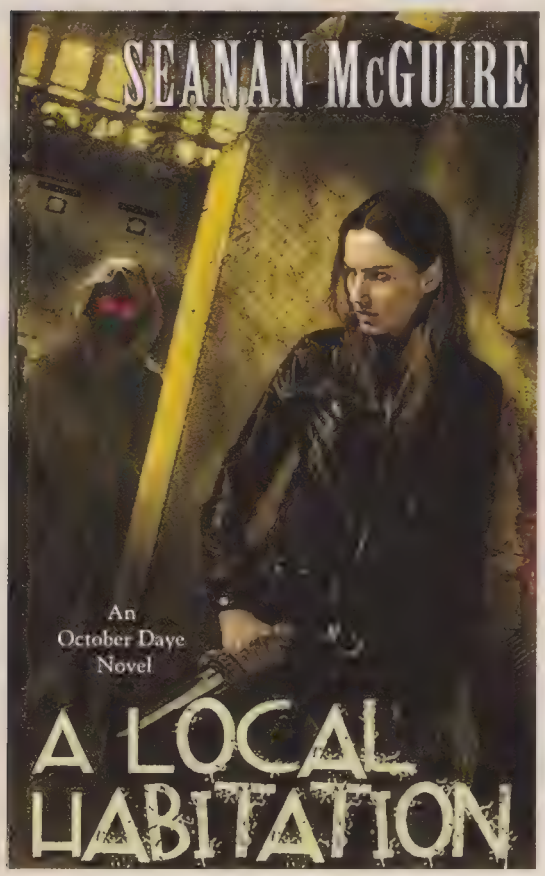
August 2010 Book Reviews: A Local Habitation, Mind Games, How to Make Friends with Demons, Changes

by Elizabeth Bear

Last issue I reviewed Carrie Vaughn's *Kitty's House of Horrors*, a riff on the *Ten Little Indians*-style murder mystery in which our protagonist and a supporting cast of disposable secondary characters are locked in some isolated location while an implacable killer picks them off one by one.

Seanan McGuire's ***A Local Habitation*** (DAW, mass market paperback, 400 pages, $7.99, ISBN: 978-0756405960) is another take on that same classic genre formula, with a clever twist. In this case, the author's intrepid investigator—October Daye—is an agent of local fairy nobility, and the house of death is a fairy mound, what the characters refer to as a "Shallowing." When Daye is sent by her liege to discover why his daughter isn't returning his phone calls, she finds herself trapped in a narrowing circle of death as immortals drop like flies.

I didn't entirely buy the justification for the murders, but the increasing tension and sense of desperation as Daye tries and fails to protect her charges were very well handled, and the book manages to remain fast-paced, witty, and engaging throughout. While the setting relies heavily on established genre tropes, Daye is a likable heroine, who—unlike many urban fantasy protagonists—manages to have warm and believable friendships with male and female characters both.



Carolyn Crane's ***Mind Games*** (Spectra, mass market paperback, 384 pages, $7.99, ISBN: 978-0553592610), by contrast, throws out most of the standard trappings of urban fantasy—there are no fairies, werewolves, vampires, or sorcerers here—to concentrate on a group of competing mutants—"highcaps"—operating on both sides of the law. Their powers range from empathy to telekinesis to the ability to win over the soul of a building and make it do the highcap's bidding (that last gift provides a wonderfully inventive dilemma for the protagonists).

Crane also offers us a more than moderately charming protagonist in the person of Justine Jones, a young woman who knows she's going to die. Jones is a hypochondriac, and while she does not have highcap

powers herself, what she does have is a deep-seated conviction that she could drop dead of a cerebral vascular accident. Because of this, she's recruited by a highcap who uses neurotic people as vigilante agents of justice, in the process training them to "zing" their fear and paranoia into their targets in the interests of making the targets better people. Suffering, apparently, does develop character.

Of course, all is not as it seems, and Jones soon finds herself in over her head, betrayed by everyone, and deeply confused about whom to trust.

There were certain aspects of the book I wasn't overly fond of, such as the curiously arbitrary nature of Jones's romantic relationships with various men, but as those are fairly standard and perhaps even necessary furniture of the paranormal romance genre I don't think they constitute a flaw in the book so much as an element of the narrative that's not to my taste as a reader. Of more concern to me was the way some of the plot threads seemed to vanish when they became inconvenient to the narrative. For example, after chapters of concentration on Jones's fumbling attempts to make contact with her first target—and the target's attempts to strike back—the narrative dispenses with the

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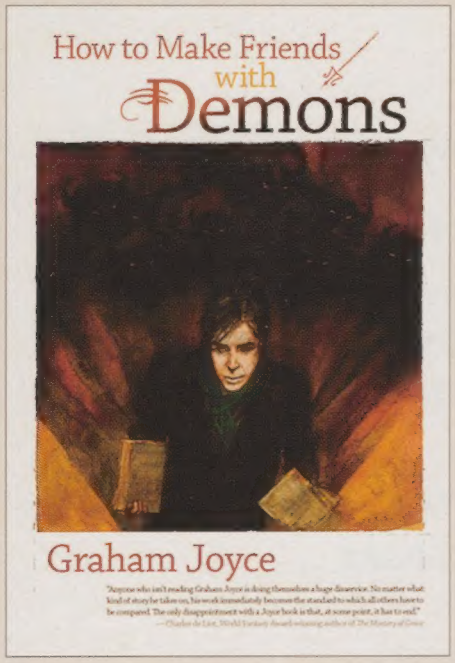
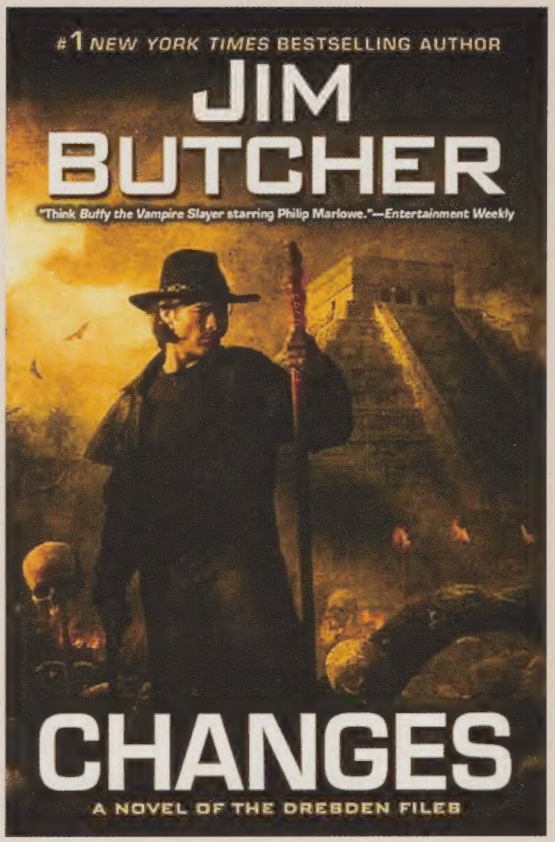


ing stereotypically "kick-ass." Also, add Jones to the list of protagonists who get points for being neither brittle nor mouthy. As a reader, I much prefer real conflict to the sort engendered when the protagonist just can't stop picking fights with everyone.

If I'm tired of American urban fantasy protagonists who mouth off to everybody, there's a thread in modern British contemporary fantasy that makes me equally weary. The narcissistic, morally corrupt, and ineffectual protagonist has taken over the subgenre, and many otherwise beautifully written books suffer under this tiresome yoke.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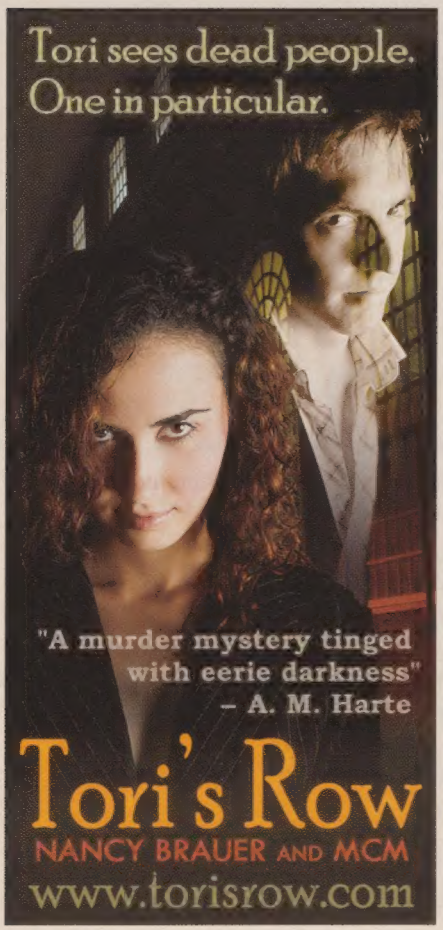
subplot with nary a ripple of satisfying resolution.

But Crane has given us a highly original world here, and a heroine who is both smart and resourceful without be-

Graham Joyce's *How to Make Friends with Demons* (Night Shade Books, trade paperback, 256 pages, $14.95, ISBN 978-1597801638) is no exception, a gorgeous novel about somebody I absolutely cannot stand. William Heaney is a judgmental, alcoholic, self-absorbed bastard who also happens to be one of the few people around who can see and interact with demons—in this case, literalized metaphors for all the horrors we inflict upon ourselves and others. While Heaney maintains that he is free of demons, it is obvious to the reader that he is self-deluding on this issue, as his life is utterly ruled by them.

But Joyce earns himself at least a partial pass from my general wrath at this category of protagonist, because even if the narrator isn't aware that he's a spasmodically unappealing human being, the *narrative* knows it, and in fact depends on him coming to terms with his own distastefulness. Also, Joyce is careful to provide sympathetic touches to leaven the narcissism, which, along with the elegance of the prose, helps the reader stick with this prickly but ultimately rewarding book to the end.



Jim Butcher's protagonist for *Changes* (Roc, hardcover, 448 pages, $25.95, ISBN: 978-0451463173), Harry Dresden, probably needs no introduction to the average fantasy reader. He too is notably mouthy, and that's one of the reasons I've never managed to connect with this series on the level that so many other readers do. Another reason is that I've always felt as if the books were somewhat emotionally distanced; they never seemed to get me in the guts quite properly.

With this novel (book12 in the series), however, that all...er...alters. Butcher had me from the first chapter, emotionally engaged and rooting for his protagonist on a level I've never quite managed before. Disaster strikes, and strikes again, and escalates from there. Nothing and no one is safe as destruction heaps upon destruction, and Dresden is forced into deeply awful choices and hideous moral compromises over and over again.

I rather expect many long-time fans will be very upset with this book and the broad swath of carnage it lays through the cozy and settled countryside of Butcher's Chicago. For me, a longtime almost-fan, the effect was the exact opposite. This is the Harry Dresden book I have been waiting for all my life.

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